

The New Gnosticism

Is It The Age of the Spirit or The Spirit of the Age?

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Entertainment Weekly is not exactly an evangelical house-organ, and yet, like many secular periodicals these days, it seems to observe more truth than a number of evangelical magazines and journals. In its October 7, 1994, issue, Jeff Gordinier wrote,

In a year when TV airwaves are aflutter with winged spirits, the bestseller lists are clogged with divine manuscripts and visions of the afterlife, and gangsta-rappers are elbowed aside on the pop charts for the hushed prayers of Benedictine monks, you don't have to look hard to find that pop culture is going gaga for spirituality. [However,] seekers of the day are apt to peel away the tough theological stuff and pluck out the most dulcet elements of faith, coming up with a soothing sampler of Judeo-Christian imagery, Eastern meditation, self-help lingo, a vaguely conservative craving for 'virtue,' and a loopy New Age pursuit of 'peace.' This happy free-for-all, appealing to Baptists and stargazers alike, comes off more like Forrest Gump's ubiquitous 'boxa chocolates' than like any real system of belief. You never know what you're going to get.

There could hardly have been a better description of the dilemma in which the ancient church found itself, from the time of the apostles until the third century. It is a heresy that is constantly threatening the orthodoxy of the church and it is as old as Satan's lie, "You shall be as gods." It is called "Gnosticism." St. Paul called the Gnostic prophets "super-apostles" who apparently knew more than God. They see into the heavenly secrets and offer techniques for escaping earthly existence. "Timothy," the Apostle warned, "guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge; by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith" (2 Tm 6:20). "We

demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God" (2 Cor 10:5). The super-apostles had preached, he says, a different gospel and a different spirit. "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Cor 11:13). The reference here is to the Gnostic emphasis on the Angel of Light versus the Angel of Darkness.

Not far beneath the surface of much of the New Testament, especially the Gospel of John and the Epistles, is a running polemic against the most dangerous heresy in church history. According to one of its early opponents, St. Clement of Alexandria, Gnosticism (from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge") consisted of the knowledge "of who we were or where we were placed, whither we hasten, from what we are redeemed, what birth is and what rebirth" (*Excerpta ex Theodoto* 78.2). Knowledge of these secrets was considered redemptive. The purpose of this article will be to explain the origins and identity of Gnosticism in an effort to establish the point that contemporary American religion, whether liberal or conservative, evangelical or New Age, Mormon or Pentecostal, represents a revival of this ancient heresy.

The Old Gnosticism

From a number of secondary sources we are able to gain a portrait which allows us to see the main features:

1. *Eclectic and polymorphic.* A "cut-and-paste" spirituality emerges from the Gnostic writings. As Philip Lee observes, "Gnostic syncretism...believes everything in general for the purpose of avoiding a belief in something in particular. In the case of Christian Gnosticism,

what is being avoided is the particularity of the Gospel, that which is a 'stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.'" (1) It is generally agreed that Gnosticism emerged as a form of mystical Christian spirituality blended together with Greek paganism. We recall Paul in Athens, in the Areopagus, where "people did nothing but discuss the latest ideas" (Acts 17:21), telling the Greeks that they were "very religious." Gnosticism was an attempt to incorporate the seeker spirituality of the Greeks into Christianity.

In its very nature, it was diverse and capable of amalgamation and assimilation of various religious systems. Biblical religion, by contrast, insisted upon the uniqueness of divine self-disclosure in Scripture and in God's redemptive acts. There is one God (Yahweh) who is known in the written and Living Word. Many of the church fathers were simply exasperated by trying to figure out what the Gnostic texts actually meant, whereas Christianity held distinct, easily understood and well-defined doctrinal convictions.

2. *Individualistic and subjective.* While the writings are extremely esoteric and mystical, there is an obvious thread of individualism and an inward focus characteristic of mysticism. As in Greek Platonism, the subject (the knower) has priority over the object (the known), and the path to spirituality is through inwardness, meditation, and self-realization.

3. *Immanence over transcendence.* In terms of the individual's relation to God, the Gnostic stresses God's nearness over his distant holiness and sovereignty. In fact, the individual self is a "spark" of the One (God). As one scholar puts it, "The self is the indwelling of God." (2) There is a direct intimacy between the divine and the self that requires no mediation. In Gnostic literature, the relationship between "God" and the self is often described in romantic and even erotic language.

4. *Spirit over matter.* Sometimes called in our day "mind over matter," the Greek and Gnostic

worldview is dualistic. That is, it divides the world into matter (evil) and spirit (good). Evil, suffering, illness and death are all attributed to the existence of matter and the "Fall" was not from innocence to rebellion (as in the biblical account), but from pure spirit to physical bodies. Imprisoned in a material world, the self is alienated from its true home. This theme of a war between Light and Darkness, Spirit and Matter, the Divine Within and the World Outside, and the sense of alienation, despair, loneliness and abandonment in the physical world, is the recurring key to understanding Gnosticism. (3) In our day, Matthew Fox, repeating the warning of self-described Gnostic psychologist C. J. Jung, expresses this sentiment well: "One way to kill the soul is to worship a God outside you" (Roof, p. 75).

5. *Anti-institutional orientation.* Associated with matter and the physical imprisonment of the self, institutions are viewed as spiritual enemies. The Outside God and the Outside Church are enemies of the soul, directing the self away from one's own inner experience to others and to formal structures of authority, creeds, doctrines, rituals and sacraments. St. Ignatius of Antioch (d. A.D. 110) charged, "They have no concern for love, none for the widow, the orphan, the afflicted, the prisoner, the hungry, the thirsty. They stay away from the Eucharist and prayer." (4) This did not mean, however, that they did not form communities, but these were ascetic sects that served to nurture individual rather than communal concerns, and experiential rather than liturgical and doctrinal forms of public worship.

6. *Anti-sacramental.* Closely related to its suspicion of the church as an institution was Gnosticism's disregard for sacraments. If the self enjoyed a direct and immediate relationship with God's Spirit, and knowledge came through a secret revelation of a mystical nature, surely the introduction of material means of grace—the printed word (accessible to everyone), water (in Baptism), and bread and wine (the Eucharist)—actually become impediments to real fellowship with God. They are insufficiently "spiritual" for Gnostic piety, as rebirth (a prominent Gnostic

theme) is by the Spirit in opposition to matter. Furthermore, the gnosis (Revelation Knowledge) was based on the idea that only a few really knew the secrets, while Christianity's emphasis on Word and sacrament, available to anyone who could read or eat, challenged this private, spiritual elitism.

7. *Anti-historical.* Lee notes, "Gnostic 'knowledge' is unrelated in any vital sense either to nature or to history" (p. 102). As spirit is opposed to matter, and individual inwardness is opposed to an institutional church, eternity is opposed to time. Salvation for the Gnostic is redemption from the body, institutions, and the grinding process of history into which the pure self is mercilessly thrown.

In biblical religion, God not only created the world (material as well as spiritual), and pronounced it "good," but also created matter and history in which to unfold his salvation. In fact, Christianity's cardinal belief in salvation by God becoming flesh, and by his fleshly resurrection promising resurrection of our bodies, was anathema to Gnosticism, as it was foolishness to Greeks who generally saw spirit as good, and matter as evil. In Christianity, redemption does not take place in a super-spiritual sphere above real human history, but within it. Gnosticism, however, emphasizes instead the self's personal, direct encounter with God here and now, and has little or no place for the historical events of God's saving activity.

8. *Anti-Jewish.* While biblical religion focused on God's personal involvement with the world in creation and redemption, through the bloody sacrifices that anticipated the Messiah, Gnosticism harbored a deep distrust of the Old Testament God. In fact, two Gnostic sects appear in this connection. Marcion (d. A.D. 160) rejected the Old Testament entirely on the basis that it represented a wrathful Judge who created matter and imprisoned souls in history, while the New Testament God (Jesus) was the God of Love. The Creator-God (Old Testament) and the Redeemer-God (New Testament) were viewed as opposites in Marcionism. In addition

to the Old Testament, Luke's Gospel and Paul's epistles underwent radical revisions.

In the following century, Mani, a Persian evangelist whose ideas spread quickly to the West and were embraced by St. Augustine before his conversion, founded a powerful sect of Manichaeism. Once again, it was deeply dualistic (spirit vs. matter, Light vs. Darkness, etc.) and championed salvation chiefly in terms of secret knowledge of the principles for overcoming the world, nature, and history through spiritual ascent.

9. *Feminist.* Ancient Gnosticism, as we have seen, divided the world into spirit and matter as columns of "good" and "bad." They defined characteristics of femininity as love, freedom, affirmation, and nurture, and these were in the "good" column, while those of masculinity were defined as justice, law, wrath, and strength, and put in the "bad" column. This is in sharp contrast to the Christian God who, in both Testaments, is a good, gracious, loving and saving, as well as just, holy and sovereign Father. "Sophia," the Greek word for "wisdom," after the goddess of wisdom, became the "God" of many Gnostics. The 13th-century mystic, Meister Eckhart, wrote, "What does God do all day long? God gives birth. From all eternity God lies on a maternity bed giving birth," and this image is replete in the mystical literature. "Ancient Gnosticism," Lee writes, "loathed the patriarchal and authoritarian qualities of official Christianity. From the Gnostic point of view, the structure and discipline of the Church stifled the spirit" (p. 158). The antipathy toward nature was reflected in the Gnostic celebration of the "androgynous [i.e., sexless] self." While the body may be either male or female, the spirit is "free."

One must beware of concluding that the "knowledge" championed by the Gnostics was the same thing that we mean normally by the term. Lee observes:

The difference between orthodox knowledge and Gnostic knowledge has been described as

the difference between open revelation and secret revelation. Although it is true for both faiths that the Holy Spirit is at work to open the eyes of the believer that he may know the truth, within orthodox thought the Holy Spirit's work takes place in the presence of, and in terms of, given historical data and within the context of the Holy Catholic Church. Thus, in the Apostles' Creed, the article affirming belief in the Holy Spirit is securely nestled between belief in the person and work of Jesus Christ and a willingness to learn from the Holy Catholic Church" (p. 101).

Gnostic "knowledge" is not only anti-historical and subjective; it is anti-intellectual and immediate. This is why St. Irenaeus called it "pseudo-knowledge" and Paul told Timothy it was "knowledge falsely called" (1 Tm 6:20). It preferred what we often call "heart knowledge" to "head knowledge," although Christianity knew no such dichotomy.

Especially popular in Alexandria, Gnosticism threatened Christianity's very existence, not as an external threat, but as an internal rival. In other words, it attempted to reinterpret biblical religion and reshape it into something other than that which was announced by the prophets, fulfilled in Christ and proclaimed by the apostles. Even as Christianity officially condemned the heresy, and the ancient fathers wrote voluminously on the subject, the philosophical influence of Greek Platonism continued to shape the medieval church. Nevertheless, whenever the unadulterated Gnostic tenets would reappear, as in such medieval sects as the Albigensians, the Cathari (Pure Ones) and Bogemils, the church reasserted its apostolic and catholic condemnations. At the time of the Reformation, the Anabaptists revived Gnosticism, and a number of Renaissance humanists, including Petrarch, had also embraced this revival.

A number of scholars, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, have argued that the Reformation represented not only a reaction against Pelagianism (the ancient heresy of works-

righteousness), but also against Gnosticism. By charging that the church had allowed Greek philosophy priority in interpreting Scripture, the Reformers recovered the Bible's clear declarations on creation, redemption, worship, the work of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, the doctrine of the church, Word and sacrament, and a host of related teachings.

The New Gnosticism

Without offering a chronicle on Gnosticism throughout church history, our purpose here is simply to refer to that portion of history that most directly bears on the current revival.

A trip to the local bookstore confirms that there is a revival of explicit Gnostic spirituality in American culture, with the New Age movement claiming direct descent. (5) Often passing for psychology, philosophy and religion, Gnosticism is now back with a vengeance and forms the broad parameters (if there are any) for the smorgasbord of American spirituality. After two world wars, Westerners have become disillusioned with the grand scheme of turning this world into Paradise Restored. Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Andre Malraux poured their energies into lamenting the sense of despair and alienation, and the theme of humanity being "thrown" into the world, imprisoned in evil material structures is prominent in their work. The popularity of existentialism blended with an older Transcendentalism that was always seething just beneath the surface of the American consciousness to produce a post-war generation of "seekers" who were ripe for Gnostic spirituality. It is that older Transcendentalism that must be explained before we can understand the ways in which modern evangelicalism and liberalism represent sister "denominations" in what Harold Bloom calls "The American Religion: Gnosticism."

Mysticism has a long tradition within Christianity, and although it developed out of the same influences and centers as Gnosticism itself, it was deemed acceptable even by some

who had opposed the heresy. The "ladder of spiritual ascent" and the dualism between spirit and matter, the inwardness and related themes, remind us that the difference is a matter of degree. In a sympathetic treatment, titled, *Mysticism in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Zondervan, 1989), United Methodist theologian Robert G. Tuttle, Jr. traces the influences of Greek and Roman Catholic mysticism on John Wesley. Through the various Holiness groups in America, evangelicalism was heavily influenced by a form of spirituality that was considered by many, especially at Princeton Seminary, to be a rival to the historic Christianity recovered in the Reformation. But there were other influences in the culture that contributed to the Gnostic awakening in America. Just as the medieval church was unwittingly shaped by Greek Platonic influences, modern American Christianity, both liberal and evangelical, is shaped by Romanticism-itself a revival of Greek and Gnostic influences.

The Romantics include such worthies as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82), who resigned his Boston Unitarian pastorate in 1832 because he could no longer accept institutional religion and refused to serve "Communion." (Since Unitarians do not have a genuine Communion, it is difficult to regard this as a major departure.) After all, Emerson said, he was himself a spark of God and enjoyed direct access without an incarnate Mediator and the impediments of physical sacraments. At Harvard, Emerson declared that orthodox Christianity was dead, and the only way forward was to recover the "spiritual" dimension of religion. The jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes was a great fan of Emerson's. Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) was closely associated with Emerson and other "Transcendentalists," as many of the American Romantics were now being called. *The Westminster Dictionary of Church History* defines Transcendentalism as "an optimistic, mystic and naturalistic state of mind rather than a system of thought," which had "a wide influence on American literature, philosophy, and religion. Based on English romanticism (Coleridge, Wordsworth, Carlyle) and German philosophical idealism, it found Calvinistic

orthodoxy too harsh and Unitarian liberalism too arid. It emphasized individual experience as sacred, unique, and authoritative."

The sense of alienation is apparent in Nathaniel Hawthorne: "Taking no root, I soon weary of any soil in which I may be temporarily deposited. The same impatience I may feel, or conceive of, as regards this earthly life." (6) If this feeling was true in the early 19th century, it is certainly exacerbated by the influences of modernity: the rootlessness precipitated by rapid travel, mobility, displacement of families, and technological advances that tend to dehumanize existence. As for the Gnostic preoccupation with spirit, and the eternal over matter and time, Emerson declared, "I am to invite men drenched in Time to recover themselves and come out of time, and taste their native immortal air." (7) Like the ancient Gnostics who, according to St. Ignatius, did not bother themselves with the physical needs of this world, Emerson's spiritual arrogance knew no bounds: "I have quite other slaves to free than those negroes, to wit, imprisoned spirits...They have no other watchman, or lover, or defender, but I." (8)

The recurring note in Romanticism, and especially in its American Transcendental variety, is personal experience: the self's transcendence of community, flesh, history, creed, doctrine, church, Word and sacraments, to ascend to the lofty heights of deity. Each individual self is "God" and requires no mediation for access to the divine.

We do not have to look very far to see the influence of this movement on 19th-century Protestantism. The revivalistic evangelicals wanted to escape from this world by a personal experience of being born again, and successive experiences: A second blessing or a rededication would revive the soul in its flight toward Deity and full surrender. Doctrine was considered an encumbrance, as were creeds, liturgies and sacraments, and the anti-intellectual strain of Gnosticism reared its ugly head. In orthodox Christianity, grace redeems this world; in Gnosticism, it redeems the self from nature.

Grace did not save nature, but provided a way of escape. At the same time, "the liberals," according to Philip Lee, "made ample room for nature on their stage by moving grace into the wings. There remained in both camps a Gnostic separation of Creation from Redemption" (p. 93).

At this point, psychology was born and took root quickly in America more than anywhere else. It offered an alternative to theology, as the study of the self and self-consciousness replaced the study of God and his redemptive acts. George Ripley declared during this period, "The time has come when a revision of theology is demanded. Let the study of theology commence with the study of human consciousness." (9) But this psychological orientation not only demanded the first word, it ended up swallowing everything within reach and the stage was set for the therapeutic revolution of the 20th century, with peace of mind and eventually self-esteem becoming more important than sin and grace. Narcissism (self-worship) became legitimate and, in fact, the only religious duty. Although C. J. Jung, a father of modern psychology, was openly and self-described as a Gnostic, his mysticism is easily absorbed into the greater Gnostic ooze of contemporary pop-psychology and recovery movements.

The preaching also turned from the objective emphasis on God's saving work in Christ, to techniques for self-improvement, psychologically and morally conceived. Considered too offensive for the immortal and innocent self, the Law was not suitable for preaching unless it could be shown that it was somehow beneficial for personal transformation. Divine commands had to be seen as attainable and reasonable principles for self-enhancement and universal love. Damnation was entirely out of place as a purpose for the Law, or for any sociable discourse. Similarly, the Gospel, hardly distinguishable now from the Gnostic law, became a secret formula (gnosis) for rebirth, self-realization, and the personal unmediated experience with the Divine. This was true equally for liberals and evangelicals, Unitarians

and revivalists, as well as for the many Gnostic cults that were born in this environment (Christian Science, Unity, Adventism, etc.), however differently each may have stated it.

Horace Bushnell marks the departure from an evangelical Calvinism to an evangelical Romanticism: "My heart wants the Father; my heart wants the Son; my heart wants the Holy Ghost...My heart says the Bible has a Trinity for me, and I mean to hold by my heart. I am glad a man can do it when there is no other mooring." (10) The Mormon "testimony" is quite similar when its truth-claims are founded upon a "burning in the bosom." Similarly, when evangelicals sing Romantic hymns such as, "He Lives," with the line, "You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart," they have little trouble accommodating to the Romanticism of Schleiermacher, father of modern liberalism, when he said that the essence of Christianity is "the feeling of absolute dependence." And when evangelicals eschew creeds, doctrines, liturgies, and sacraments over personal experience, how can they quibble with the liberal Adolf von Harnack, who believed that "the authentically spiritual is composed of those things that are inward, spontaneous and ethical as opposed to the outward, organized, ceremonial and dogmatic"? (11) Gnosticism becomes the tie that binds.

At last, we come to our own century. A number of books have been published in recent years pointing up the "Gnosticization" of American religion, including Philip Lee's, *Against The Protestant Gnostics* (Oxford, 1987), and Harold Bloom's, *The American Religion* (Simon and Schuster, 1992). Although Bloom, a distinguished Yale professor, and the nation's leading literary critic, identifies himself as a Jewish Gnostic, he provides a provocative insight into the popularization of Gnosticism. Other studies have pointed tangentially to this same condition, such as those of professors James D. Hunter (University of Virginia), Wade Clark Roof (University of California), and Robert Wuthnow (Princeton University). Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*

and Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* also point in the same direction.

In spite of their rivalry, fundamentalism and liberalism "both essentially proclaim a Christ who does not redeem," but merely reveals, according to Lee (p. 107). All of these writers point to the breakdown in the Reformation's orthodox stance in both conservative and liberal camps as opening the door to Transcendentalism and, finally, to the current orientation. Beyond the liberal-evangelical split, Wade Clark Roof now says we cannot discern any real differences between New Age and evangelical spirituality on a number of counts. This new Gnosticism "celebrates experience rather than doctrine; the personal rather than the institutional; the mythic and dreamlike over the cognitive; people's religion over official religion; soft, caring images of deity over hard, impersonal images; the feminine and the androgynous over the masculine" (Roof, p. 132). Although Roof does not make the point, these are clearly the tenets of ancient Gnosticism.

Note Lee's point on Christ as Revealer [Gnosis] over Christ as Redeemer:

Another way to shed light on the American tendency to regard Christ as revealer only is, to observe the American fascination with technique. For the evangelicals, conversion is a technique, a necessary one, for salvation. The history of Israel and the life of Jesus, which indeed were often spiritualized beyond recognition, were important only insofar as they could be employed to bring sinners to repentance (p. 109).

Lee says that the liberal approach to the Scriptures, "following its Transcendental heritage," was to see them as "techniques for living the Christian life" and the Bible became "a rich source of those truths that we, in our hearts, already know" (p. 111). But this is now precisely the same attitude often taken by evangelicals to the Scriptures. Both liberals and evangelicals disdain doctrine for personal experience, and objective truth for personal

transformation, and in this sense, each is, in its own way, Gnostic. The anti-intellectualism is understandable, according to Lee. "If God is immanent, present within our psyche, if we already have the truth within, then why go through all the hassle of studying theology?" (p. 111). Isn't this precisely the point of the division many of us grew up with between head knowledge and heart knowledge? The former is intellectual, the latter spiritual—that is, gnosis. James D. Hunter observes, "The spiritual aspects of Evangelical life are increasingly approached by means of an interpreted in terms of 'principles,' 'rules,' 'steps,' 'laws,' 'codes,' 'guidelines,' and the like." (12) Wade Clark Roof adds, "Salvation as a theological doctrine...becomes reduced to simple steps, easy procedures, and formulas for psychological rewards. The approach to religious truth changes—away from any objective grounds on which it must be judged, to a more subjective, more instrumental understanding of what it does for the believer, and how it can do what it does most efficiently" (p. 195).

Pentecostalism represents an even greater dependence on Gnostic tendencies. Lee writes, "Just as faith healing held an important place among the medieval Gnostics of southern France, it has also been a significant element in the more extreme sects of Protestantism...The Savior God is pitted against the natural God, and before millions of television viewers the Savior God prevails" (p. 119). Roman Catholic scholar Ronald Knox's work, *Enthusiasm* (Oxford, 1950) remains a classic study of this subject. Even the desire to speak in tongues, as if the biblical idea of tongues was a supernatural language unknown to mortals, shows the desire to escape even natural human language in a direct spiritual encounter of immediate ecstasy. Although the biblical writers were well aware of this practice of "ecstatic utterances" in pagan religion, they did not use the Greek word for this practice, but instead chose *glossai* (lit., "languages"), leading us to conclude that tongues refers in the New Testament to known earthly speech.

The outer edges of Pentecostalism are especially blatant in Gnostic emphases, as a number of works have shown, including *The Agony of Deceit*. (13) Salvation is knowledge-"Revelation Knowledge" (Kenneth Copeland, Kenneth Hagin, Paul Crouch and other "faith teachers" use the upper case to distinguish this from mere written revelation). The Word that truly saves is not the written text of Scripture, proclaiming Christ the Redeemer, but is rather the "Rhema" Word that is spoken directly to the spirit by God's Spirit. Bloom writes, "Paul was arguing against Corinthian Enthusiasts or Gnostics, and yet I wonder why his strictures have not discouraged American Pentecostals more than they seem to have done...*Pentecostalism is American shamanism*," although the author himself applauds the Gnostic tendency. Bloom concludes of this group, "To know also that one is completely free-the Emersonian Wildness-because one's solitude is shared with the Holy Spirit, carries the rapture to a Sublime elevation. And though Assemblies of God theology is officially Trinitarian, in praxis the Pentecostal knows only Oneness, and calls the Holy Spirit by the name of Jesus, not the Jesus of the Gospels or even the Christ of Paul, but the American Jesus, a Pentecostal like oneself." (14) (It is worth noting that the Assemblies of God were involved in a rift within Pentecostalism over this very point, siding with the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity over "Oneness Pentecostals.")

For those of us who were raised in fundamentalist, evangelical or pentecostal sects, the experience of "rebirth" comes neither through the Word of the Gospel nor through the water of Baptism, but through a "Spirit Baptism" that is direct and immediate. The Word is primarily seen as an instrument for coaxing the individual into accepting the new birth. The new birth, especially if one judges by the testimonies of converts, is not so much the result of hearing with human ears, in human words, a declaration of things that happened in human history. In short, it is not so much the preaching of the Cross, but the preaching of "my personal relationship with Jesus," the day when "Jesus came into my heart," that is central. Lee

again: "Whereas classical Calvinism had held that the Christian's assurance of salvation was guaranteed only through Christ and his Church, with his means of grace, now assurance could be found only in the personal experience of having been born again. This was a radical shift, for Calvin had considered any attempt to put 'conversion in the power of man himself' to be gross popery." In fact, "Rebirth in God is the exact opposite of rebirth into a new and more acceptable self, as the self-acclaimed born again Christians would see the event" (pp. 144, 255).

Norman Vincent Peale exploited the "peace of mind" craze earlier this century, a movement that borrowed its capital from Transcendentalism directly. Nevertheless, the liberal Peale was hailed as a great evangelist by evangelical Billy Graham and was asked to participate in the crusades. Lee once again notes the tie that binds: "For both of them, Christianity is understood from a Gnostic point of view....The real world with which religion has to do is the world within" (p. 199). This is not to suggest that Billy Graham is a liberal! Rather, it is to argue that in our day Gnosticism unites more than orthodox Christianity divides.

Also in terms of their views of Christ, liberals and evangelicals reveal a common Gnostic tendency. While the liberals divided the Jesus of History (a normal Jew who lived in first-century Palestine) from the Christ of Faith (resurrected God-Man), proclaiming that the Spirit of Christ lives and calls us into vital communion even though his body is not raised, evangelicals often seem to worship the spirit of Jesus apart from his humanity. "Jesus in my heart," at the end of the day, is more important for personal Christian experience, piety, and worship than Jesus in history. Although evangelicals insist on a historical resurrection as a matter of official creed, in actual practice, one wonders why it is important if the spirit of Jesus is in one's heart? After all, no one believes that Jesus takes up physical residence in one's heart, so what can we mean by "asking Jesus into our heart" other than inviting his spirit? Little is said of the biblical notion that it is the Holy Spirit who unites us not to the spirit of Jesus in our hearts,

but to the God-Man in heaven according to both his divine and human natures.

In Gnosticism, not only the object of faith (Christ), but the act of faith, becomes radically revised. In Christianity, faith is trust in God's specific promise of salvation through Christ. In Gnosticism, faith is magic. It is a technique for getting what we want by believing in it strongly enough. As C. Peter Wagner, an advocate of the Vineyard movement, puts it, "Empirical evidence also validates the absolute necessity of faith or whatever else you want to call it-possibility thinking or goal setting-as a prerequisite for church growth." (15) Is faith really a synonym for possibility thinking and goal setting? Then would not everyone possess faith? Or is faith a unique gift from God to trust in Christ, as in biblical teaching? The Second Helvetic Confession (a 16th century Reformed statement) declares, "Christian faith is not an opinion or human conviction, but a most firm trust and a clear and steadfast assent of the mind, and then a most certain apprehension of the truth of God presented in the Scriptures and in the Apostles' Creed, and thus also of God himself, the greatest good, and especially of God's promise and of Christ who is the fulfillment of all promises."

But Wagner's worldview is also dominated by the Gnostic fascination with dualism between Light and Darkness, as spiritual warfare takes on an increasingly super-spiritual preoccupation. Like Frank Peretti's novels, this popular view of spiritual warfare in which individual believers decide the outcome of battles between good angels and bad angels is too close to Manichaeism for comfort.

The Gnostic revolution has been demonstrating its elasticity in recent years in the spirituality of the baby boomers, whose interest in the sacred has been celebrated in national periodicals, the study of which has become something of a cottage industry. Wade Clark Roof sampled a wide variety of seekers. For instance, Sonny D'Antonio, raised Roman Catholic, considers

himself "a believer, but not a believer." "The material parts of the church turned me off," he says (p. 18). Mollie Stone, raised a Pentecostal, tried Native American spirituality, then Quakerism for its "inner peace," and is "turned on" to Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery groups, although she is not herself an alcoholic or related to one. As for churches? "Creeds and doctrines divide people," she says (p. 23). Roof observes, "The distinction between 'spirit' and 'institution' is of major importance." Although Roof does not point to Gnosticism, his studies mark undeniable parallels: "Spirit is the inner, experiential aspect of religion; institution is the outer, established form of religion. This distinction is increasingly pertinent because of the strong emphasis on self in contemporary culture and the related shift from objective to subjective ways of ordering experience" (p. 30). Religion is too restricting, but spirituality offers a way of plugging into the divine with the correct spiritual technology. Roof explains, "As a computer programmer who happens to be an evangelical put it, without any prompting on our part: 'We all access God differently'" (p. 258).

The whole point of Christianity, however, is that one cannot "access" God at all! He must come to us through a personal Word (God in flesh) and a written Word (Scripture), and when we do come to him it must be through Christ, and we come to Christ through the ordained means. It might offend the Gnostic and narcissistic individualism of our age, but we do not "all access God differently."

Roof refers to the Outer and Inner Worlds, the former suspect while the latter is always respected. "Direct experience is always more trustworthy, if for no other reason than because of its 'inwardness' and 'within-ness'-two qualities that have come to be much appreciated in a highly expressive, narcissistic culture" (p. 67). But it is the surveys themselves that bear the greatest interest. Fifty-three percent of the Boomers said it was "'more important to be alone and to meditate' than to worship with others" (p. 70). But this was as true for many evangelicals as New Agers. Linda, one respondent, an evangelical who likes James

Dobson and believes that America is in moral trouble, tells us, "You don't have to go to church. I think the reason I do is because it helps me to grow. It's especially good for my family, to teach them the good and moral things" (p. 105). In other words, the church imparts knowledge, not of sin and salvation by Christ's atonement, but by practical techniques for Christian living. It is purely narcissistic and individualistic as well as moralistic. The church that will get the vote of the seeker, then, is the church that offers (and delivers) more gnosis-saving techniques and secret formulae-than others. In fact, according to Roof's surveys, 80 percent of Americans believe "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues" (p. 256). "Respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, 'People have God within them, so churches aren't really necessary.' Right to the point, the question taps two views common to spiritual seekers: one, an immanent as opposed to a transcendent view of God; and two, an anti-institutional stance toward religion." The results? "Sixty percent of seekers view God in this mystical sense..." (p. 84). The mystical seekers' spirituality "is rooted more in their own biographies and experiences than in any grand religious narrative that purports to provide answers for all times and in all places," and this blends easily with secular or pagan modes of thought (p. 85). In Christianity, it is Christ's crisis experience on a Roman scaffold outside center-city Jerusalem; in Gnosticism, it is Linda's crisis experience that counts.

If experience is most trustworthy, and the cognitive (intellectual) aspects of a religion are downplayed ("Heart Knowledge" over "Head Knowledge"), what is to keep us from another "Dark Ages" of gross superstition? Belief in ESP, astrology and reincarnation is actually highest among college graduates, says Roof (p. 71). The "unknown God" of ancient Greece turns out to be not so distant from the spirituality of the nineties. As Roof puts it, even

the "god" of evangelicals is amorphous and undefined: "This God is thought of in very human terms: God, as it were, is created in one's own image," and one might add, God is created in one's own experience. Even the evangelicals, Roof notes, "put a strong emphasis on the moral aspects of faith" over cognitive belief. The American Religion is united in its affirmation that, "It's not so much what you believe, or which religion you follow, it's how you live" (p. 186). Jesus is not as much a Savior as a moral Hero, Teacher and Guide for the *gnostikoi* - "those in the know." "Not just dropouts, but many loyalists and returnees speak of Jesus in a way that is vague theologically, but morally uplifting.... Theological language seems to have given way to psychological interpretations. If there is one theme throughout that characterizes the languages of boomer faith, it is the subjectivist character of the affirmations: 'I feel,' 'I have found,' 'I believe'" (p. 203).

One thing that needs to be said before concluding this article is that the critique of Gnosticism should not (indeed, must not) downplay the necessity of a living, personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. However, it is given by the Holy Spirit, not attained by us. We do not "appropriate" salvation and the gifts of the Spirit; the Spirit confers Christ and all of his blessings to the believer, in communion with the whole church. While we focus on the objective content of the Faith (Christ and him crucified and raised for our salvation), we must not, in reaction, jettison the subjective application of redemption. In any case, we must always keep in mind that our friendship with God (which is a wonderful promise in the Gospel) is expressed in joyful obedience, not in the narcissistic pursuit of "intimacy" as an end in itself.

In the next article, I want to relate all of this background-much of it thick in the theoretical language and tedious description-to the practical issues of Christian life and worship. I also want to offer a way out of the Gnostic maze.

1. Philip Lee, *Against The Protestant Gnostics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 80.
2. Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of The Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 76.
3. Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, second edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), pp. 50-75.
4. Henry Bettenson, *The Later Christian Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 103.
5. Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (New York: St. Martin's, 1987), p. 120. Claiming the Gnostics by name, Ferguson states, "Like that of the founding fathers and of the American Transcendentalists of the mid-1800s, the dream of the Aquarian Conspiracy in America is a framework for nonmaterialist expansion: autonomy, awakening, creativity-and reconciliation." The movement is "reluctant to create hierarchical structures" and is "averse to dogma." She says, "By integrating magic and science, art and technology, it will succeed where all the king's horses and all the king's men have failed."
6. Cited in Vernon L. Parrington, *The Romantic Revolution in America*, vol. 2 of *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959), pp. 441-2.
7. Emerson, *Journals*, ed E. W. Emerson, vol. 5, p. 288.
8. *Ibid.*, vol. 8, p. 316.
9. Cited in Lee, p. 104.
10. Martin Marty, *The Righteous Empire* (New York: Dial, 1970), pp. 184-7.
11. Cited in Lee, p. 155.
12. James D. Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandry of Modernity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983), p. 75.
13. See *The Agony of Deceit*, ed. Michael Horton (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991).
14. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), p. 177.
15. Cited in Lee, p. 210.

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