

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Your Own Personal Jesus

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Citing examples from television, pop music, and best-selling books, an article in *Entertainment Weekly* noted,

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 chocolits” than like any real system of belief. You never know what you’re gonna get.<sup>1</sup>



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The *search for the sacred* has become a recurring cover story for national news magazines for some time now. Although this search is often identified as an encouraging sign of interest in God, it may be more dangerous than atheism. At least atheism makes arguments and shows an interest in a world external to the feelings of the inner self. Furthermore, after each round of this quest for the holy grail, evangelicalism itself looks more and more indistinguishable from the ooze of pop spirituality more generally.

Not only historians and sociologists but novelists are writing about the Gnostic character of the soup that we call *spirituality* in the United States today. In an article in *Harper's*, Curtis White describes our situation quite well. When we assert, “This is my *belief*,” says White, we are invoking our right to have our own private conviction, no matter how ridiculous, not only tolerated politically but *respected* by others. “It says, ‘I’ve invested a lot of emotional energy in this belief, and in a way I’ve staked the credibility of my life on it. So if you ridicule it, you can expect a fight.’ ” In this kind of culture, “Yahweh and Baal—my God and yours—stroll arm-in-arm, as if to do so were the model of virtue itself.”

What we require of belief is not that it make sense but that it be sincere. This is so even for our more secular convictions.... Clearly, this is not the spirituality of a centralized orthodoxy. It is a sort of workshop spirituality that you can get with a cereal-box top and five dollars. And yet in our culture, to suggest that such belief

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Gordinier, “On a Ka-Ching and a Prayer,” *Entertainment Weekly*, October 7, 1994.

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is not deserving of respect makes people anxious, an anxiety that expresses itself in the desperate sincerity with which we deliver life's little lessons.... There is an obvious problem with this form of spirituality: it takes place in isolation. Each of us sits at our computer terminal tapping out our convictions.... Consequently, it's difficult to avoid the conclusion that our truest belief is the credo of heresy itself. It is heresy without an orthodoxy. It is heresy *as* an orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup>

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When the political freedom of religion has been broadened to the dogma that “everyone is free to believe whatever she likes,” says White, “there is no real shared conviction at all, and hence no church and certainly no community. Strangely, our freedom to believe has achieved the condition that Nietzsche called nihilism, but by a route he never imagined.” While European nihilism just denied God, “American nihilism is something different. Our nihilism is our capacity to believe in everything and anything all at once. It’s all good!”<sup>3</sup>

Combining this view of personal truth with free-market capitalism, even our beliefs become commodities—“content,” just as books are now “sales units.”

Our religious content becomes indistinguishable from our financial content and our entertainment content and our sports content, just as the sections of your local newspaper attest. In short, belief becomes a culture-commodity. We shop among competing options for our belief. Once reduced to the status of a commodity, our anything-goes, do-it-yourself spirituality cannot have very much to say about the more directly nihilistic conviction that we should all be free to *do* whatever we like as well, each of us pursuing our right to our isolated happiness.<sup>4</sup>

Like Nietzsche himself, who said that truth is made rather than discovered and was described by Karl Barth as “the man of azure isolation,” Americans just want to be left alone to create their own private Idaho. While evangelicals talk a lot about truth, their witness, worship, and spirituality seem in many ways more like their Mormon, New Age, and liberal nemeses than anything like historical Christianity.

White poignantly concludes his essay:

We would prefer to be left alone, warmed by our beliefs-that-make-no-sense, whether they are the quotidian platitudes of ordinary Americans, the magical thinking of evangelicals, the mystical thinking of New Age Gnostics, the teary-eyed patriotism of social conservatives, or the perfervid loyalty of the rich to their

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<sup>2</sup> Curtis White, “Hot Air Gods,” *Harper’s*, December 2007, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 13–14.

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free-market Mammon. We are thus the congregation of the Church of the Infinitely Fractured, splendidly alone together. And apparently that's how we like it. Our pluralism of belief says both to ourselves and to others, "Keep your distance." And yet isn't this all strangely familiar? Aren't these all the false gods that Isaiah and Jeremiah confronted, the cults of the "hot air gods"? The gods that couldn't scare birds from a cucumber patch? Belief of every kind and cult, self-indulgence and self-aggrandizement of every degree, all flourish. And yet God is abandoned.<sup>5</sup>

So the search for the sacred is really another round of American heresy-as-orthodoxy—the flight of the lonely soul from nowhere to nowhere. We are prisoners of our own subjectivity, confined to the tiny cell of our own limited experiences, expectations, and felt needs.

As far back as the early eighteenth century, the French commentator Alexis de Tocqueville observed the distinctly American craving "to escape from imposed systems" and "to seek by themselves and in themselves for the only reason for things, looking to results without getting entangled in the means toward them.... So each man is narrowly shut up in himself, and from that basis makes the pretension to judge the world." Americans do not need books or any other external authorities in order to find the truth, "having found it in themselves."<sup>6</sup> In his famous Harvard Divinity School address, transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) announced that "whatever hold the public worship held on us is gone or going," prophesying the day when Americans would recognize that they are "part and parcel of God," requiring no Mediator or ecclesiastical means of grace. Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" captured the unabashed narcissism of American romanticism that plagues our culture from talk shows to church.

During this same period, the message and methods of American churches also felt the impact of this romantic narcissism. It can be recognized in a host of sermons and hymns from the period, such as C. Austin Miles's hymn, "In the Garden":

I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses;  
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses.  
And He walks with me, and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own,  
And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>6</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, ed. Francis Bowen vol. 1, (New York: Century, 1898), 66.

<sup>7</sup> C. Austin Miles, "In the Garden," *Hymns for the Living Church* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 1974), 398.

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The focus of such piety is on a personal relationship with Jesus that is individualistic, inward, and immediate. One comes alone and experiences a joy that “none other has ever known.” How can any external orthodoxy tell me I’m wrong? My personal relationship with Jesus is *mine*. I do not share it with the church. Creeds, confessions, pastors, and teachers—perhaps not even the Bible—can shake my confidence in the unique experiences that I have alone with Jesus.

## A Perfect Storm

If moralism represents a drift toward the Pelagian (or at least semi-Pelagian) heresy, *enthusiasm* is an expression of the heresy known as Gnosticism. A second-century movement that seriously threatened the ancient churches, Gnosticism tried to blend Greek philosophy and Christianity. The result was an eclectic spirituality that regarded the material world as the prison house of divine spirits and the creation of an evil god (Yahweh). Their goal was to return to the spiritual, heavenly, and divine unity of which their inner self was a spark, away from the realm of earthly time, space, and bodies. (Gnostics would have applauded many of Joel Osteen’s emphases, particularly the thesis of *faith teachers* that we have divine DNA.)

Identifying sinfulness with creation as such, some Gnostic sects were extremely ascetic and rule oriented, while others were a free-for-all of orgies and mystical ecstasy. With little interest in questions of history or doctrine, the Gnostics set off on a quest to ascend the ladder of mysticism. They were all in agreement that the institutional church, with its ordained ministry, creeds, preaching, sacraments, and discipline, was alienating—like the body, it was the prison house of the individual soul.

Pelagianism and Gnosticism are different versions of what Gerhard Forde called the “glory story.” Following Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, which followed Romans 10 and 1 Corinthians 1, the Reformer contrasts the theology of glory with the theology of the cross. As Forde explains,

The most common overarching story we tell about ourselves is what we will call the glory story. We came from glory and are bound for glory. Of course, in between we seem somehow to have gotten derailed—whether by design or accident we don’t quite know—but that is only a temporary inconvenience to be fixed by proper religious effort. What we need is to get back on “the glory road.” The story is told in countless variations. Usually the subject of the story is “the

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soul.” ... The basic scheme is what Paul Ricoeur has called “the myth of the exiled soul.”<sup>8</sup>

In neither version does one need to be rescued. Assisted, directed, enlightened perhaps, but not rescued—at least not through a bloody cross.

Both versions of the glory story drive us deeper into ourselves, identifying God with the inner self instead of calling us outside ourselves. In the 1930s, Yale’s H. Richard Niebuhr offered a scolding description of Protestant liberalism’s message: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a world without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”<sup>9</sup> The *cross story* and the *glory story* represent not merely different emphases but entirely different religions, as J. Gresham Machen points out in his controversial book, *Christianity and Liberalism*.

The glory story is our natural religion, woven throughout the world’s religions, philosophies, spiritualities, and moralities. It makes sense to us. As we are wired for law, we are also wired for glory. God set before Adam a covenant of life by which he would attain everlasting life for himself and his posterity. All of us are still created in God’s image, naturally recognizing this sense of a divine commission. We come into the world ready for action. The only difference since the fall is that we’ve gone AWOL, using all of these gifts of our creation against the Creator and making a mess of things. We need the cross, but we think we just need to find our way back to the glory road to resume our upward march.

Since the fall, our natural wiring for fulfilling a task in order to attain everlasting blessedness with God has been corrupted into a tyrannical march across the landscape of creation, building empires of oppression, injustice, and pride. Religion is just another way of turning our native awareness of God into our own attempts to take heaven by storm and bring it under our control. Pelagianism does this by practical works, and Gnosticism ascends the ladder of mystical spirituality. No longer a sovereign God who reigns over us and is completely different from us, the God of Gnosticism is always friendly and familiar precisely because our own inner self is itself divine.

Pelagianism leads to Christless Christianity because we do not need a Savior but a good example. Gnosticism’s route to Christless Christianity is by turning the story of a good Creator, a fall into sin, and redemption through the incarnation, bloody death, and bodily

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<sup>8</sup> Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 5.

<sup>9</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Chicago: Willett, Clark, 1937; repr., Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 193.

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resurrection of the Son into a myth of an evil creator, a fall into matter, and redemption by inner enlightenment. While the gospel calls us to look outside ourselves for salvation, Pelagianism and Gnosticism combine to keep us looking to ourselves and within ourselves. Together, they have created the perfect storm: the *American religion*. No one has to teach us a gospel of salvation by inner enlightenment and moral self-improvement; rather, the Word of God has to *break* our addiction to this glory story by telling us the truth about what God's law really demands and his gospel really gives.

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In his description of the theology of glory, Luther speaks of the different ladders that we vainly try to climb to ascend to God: rational speculation, mystical experience, and moral striving. All three are as abundantly evident today as part of the American captivity of the church as they were in Luther's day. These are fairly sweeping accusations, so I will try to make the case that we are caught up today in the throes of this perfect storm.

## Gnosticism as the American Religion?

Contemporary descriptions in news periodicals and polling data consistently reveal that the ever-popular *search for the sacred* in American culture shares a lot of similarities with Gnosticism. Of course in the most popular versions there may be no explicit awareness of this connection or any direct dependence on such sources.

There is an explicit revival of Gnosticism in our day, in both the academy and popular culture, from Harvard Divinity School seminars to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. The Gnosticism aisle in the typical bookstore chain (next to religion and spirituality) is evidence of renewed interest in pagan spiritualities. But from a Christian perspective, perhaps the greatest motivation for such widespread interest is that Gnosticism deflects accountability for sin and evil to the Creator rather than to the creature, allowing us to suppress the truth, looking within ourselves to create out of our own imagination an idol that we can manipulate and control—one who, like Israel's golden calf, will no longer terrify with disturbing words. Matthew Fox, repeating the warning of self-described Gnostic psychologist Carl Jung, expresses this sentiment well: "One way to kill the soul is to worship a God outside you."<sup>10</sup> That was the message also of the American transcendentalists, such as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman.

Some scholars and religious leaders are attracted to Gnosticism today because it offers spirituality without any particular creed—certainly without being nailed down to the particularity of Jesus Christ and his exclusive claims. Although the so-called Gnostic

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<sup>10</sup> Cited in Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 75.

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Gospels were written much later than the canonical Gospels of the New Testament, they are often celebrated as the expression of an alternative Christianity that was more tolerant and open to paganism than the official church that tried to silence them. In some of the Gnostic texts there is a celebration of the goddess, who is androgynous and engages in lesbian practices.<sup>11</sup> Others see Gnosticism as a way of blending various mystical traditions of East and West: Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, and new religions. In addition to these motives, Gnosticism is seen as a way of blending science and magic. "By integrating magic and science, art and technology," writes Marilyn Ferguson, "it will succeed where all the king's horses and all the king's men have failed."<sup>12</sup>

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As we participate in an increasingly diverse culture, younger Christians are especially vulnerable to syncretism (that is, blending Christian and non-Christian beliefs and practices) if they have been less immersed in the Scriptures than in the culture's religious pluralism. Just as likely as their parents to defend their personal faith in the spirit of moralistic, therapeutic deism, as Christian Smith documents, this generation is even more uncomfortable with exclusive truth claims and even more unlikely to know the basics of Christian doctrine.

Other Christian writers have concentrated on the revival of Gnosticism in its explicit forms.<sup>13</sup> I am more concerned here, however, with the more general and unwitting *Gnosticism Lite* that has pervaded American spirituality for some time, including evangelicalism. This version does not require any explicit awareness of, much less attachment to, Gnosticism's esoteric myth of creation and redemption by enlightenment. But the opposition between inner divinity, enlightenment, and redemption and an external God, the external Word, an external redemption in Christ and an institutional church offers a striking parallel to America's search for the sacred.

In American religion, as in ancient Gnosticism, there is almost no sense of God's difference from us—in other words, his majesty, sovereignty, self-existence, and holiness. God is my buddy, my inmost experience, or the power source for my living my best life now. God is not strange (that is, holy), and he is certainly not a judge. He does not evoke fear, awe, or a sense of terrifying and disorienting beauty. Furthermore, all the focus on making atonement through a bloody sacrifice seems crude and unspiritual to Gnostics

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<sup>11</sup> As in *The Apocalypse of Adam*, or the Trimorphic Protennoia concept, found among the Nag Hammadi discoveries.

<sup>12</sup> Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s* (New York: J. P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1980), 18.

<sup>13</sup> On the rising interest in Gnostic and pagan spiritualities, see especially Peter Jones, *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994). In addition to his books on this subject, Jones has launched *Christian Witness to a Pagan Planet*, [www.cwipp.org](http://www.cwipp.org).

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when, after all, the point of salvation is to escape the physical realm. All of this is too “Jewish,” according to Gnostics from Marcion to Scheiermacher to the Re-Imagining Conference of mainline Protestant leaders (especially radical feminists), who explicitly appeal to Gnosticism in their screeds against Christ’s atoning sacrifice. The God of Gnosticism is not the one before whom Isaiah said, “Woe is me, for I am undone!” (Isa. 6:5 NKJV), or Peter said, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:8). Whether in its explicit or implicit expressions, Gnosticism exchanges the strange and often troubling God of Israel for an idol that never really judges and therefore never really forgives.

Instead of God’s free decision to make his home with us in the world he created, Gnostics believe we are at home with God already, in the stillness of our inner self and away from all entanglements in space and time. As the second-century church father Irenaeus pointed out, Gnostics simply do not care about the unfolding plan of redemption in history because they do not care about history. Time and space are alien to the innermost divine self. It is not surprising news that God loves us. After all, God is always our friend, never our enemy. God cannot help but like us—both because of who he is (Love) and because of who we are (lovely). Luther and Calvin say that this was the essence of “enthusiasm” (literally, *God-within-ism*). As Luther puts it, this is the attempt to ascend the ladder from matter and history to spirit and the eternal vision of the *naked God*. Yet, apart from the incarnate Word, this dazzling god we encounter at the top of that ladder is really the devil, who “disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14).

This characteristically American approach to religion, in which the direct relationship of the soul to God generates an almost romantic encounter with the sacred, makes inner experience the measure of spiritual genuineness. Instead of being concerned that our spiritual leaders faithfully interpret Scripture and are sent by Christ through the official ordination of his church, we are more concerned that they exude *vulnerability, authenticity,* and the familiar *spontaneity* that tells us that they have a personal relationship with Jesus. Everything perceived as external to the self—the church, the gospel, the Word and sacraments, the world, and even God—must either be marginalized or, in more radical versions, rejected as that which would alienate the soul from its immediacy to the divine.

When push comes to shove, many Christians today justify their beliefs and practices on the basis of their own experience. Regardless of what the church teaches—or perhaps even what is taught in Scripture—the one unassailable authority in the American religion is the self’s inner experience. This means, however, that it is not only one’s relationship with Jesus but Jesus himself who becomes a wax figure to be molded according to whatever experiences, feelings, and felt needs one has decided to be most decisive. No longer constrained by creeds and confessions, sermons and catechism, baptism and Eucharist in the covenant assembly, the romantic self aspires to a unique and

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spontaneous experience. As the hymn cited earlier has it, "I come to the garden *alone*... And the joy we share as we tarry there, *none other has ever known*" (emphasis added).

It is therefore not surprising that today the *search for the sacred* continues to generate a proliferation of sects. In fact, sociologist Robert Bellah has coined the term *Sheilaism* to describe American spirituality, based on one interview in which a woman named Sheila said she just follows her own inner voice.<sup>14</sup> Your own "Personal Jesus," as the title of a Depeche Mode song parody,<sup>15</sup> seems to be the informal but very intense spirituality of many American Christians as well.

Philip Lee's *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (Oxford, 1987) and Harold Bloom's *The American Religion* (Simon and Schuster, 1992) point out the connections between this popular spirituality and Gnosticism with great insight. It is especially worth pondering Harold Bloom's learned ruminations here because, as he himself observes, Philip Lee *laments* the Gnosticism of American religion while Bloom *celebrates* it.<sup>16</sup>

Hailed as America's most distinguished literary critic, Bloom (whose fascinating seminar on Shakespeare I had the pleasure of taking) displays a sophisticated grasp of the varieties of ancient Gnosticism as well as its successive eruptions in the West, through radical forms of Jewish and Christian mysticism (especially Kabbalah), Joachim of Fiore, and Meister Eckhart, to the Anabaptists, millennial enthusiasts, *inner light* sects, all the way to American transcendentalism (Whitman, Thoreau, and Emerson), Mormonism, and the New Age movement.

First of all, says Bloom, "Freedom, in the context of the American Religion, means being alone with God or with Jesus, the American God or the American Christ." This unwritten creed is as evident in the history of American evangelicalism as it is in Emerson. "As a religious critic," Bloom says, "I remain startled by and obsessed with the revivalistic element in our religious experience. Revivalism, in America, tends to be the perpetual shock of the individual discovering yet again what she and he always have known, which is that God loves her and him on an absolutely personal and indeed intimate basis."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 221, 235.

<sup>15</sup> Depeche Mode, "Personal Jesus," songwriter Martin L. Gore, *Violator* album, Grabbing Hands Music/EMI Music, 1989.

<sup>16</sup> Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 26–27.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, 17.

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Second, as extreme as it at first appears, Bloom suggests that whatever the stated doctrinal positions evangelicalism shares with historic Christianity,

Mormons and Southern Baptists call themselves Christians, but like most Americans they are closer to ancient Gnostics than to early Christians.... The American Religion is pervasive and overwhelming, however it is masked, and even our secularists, indeed even our professed atheists, are more Gnostic than humanist in their ultimate presuppositions. We are a religiously made culture, furiously searching for the spirit, but each of us is subject and object of the one quest, which must be for the original self, a spark or breath in us that we are convinced goes back to before the Creation.<sup>18</sup>

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“The Christ of the twentieth century” is no longer really even a distinct historical person but “has become a personal experience for the American Christian, quite clearly for the Evangelicals.”<sup>19</sup> In this scheme, history is no longer the sphere of Christianity. The focus of faith and practice is not so much Christ’s objective person and work for us, outside of us, as it is a *personal relationship* that is defined chiefly in terms of inner experience.

Although he may at times overstate his thesis, Bloom draws on numerous primary and secondary sources from the history of particular movements to build his case. In one chapter, for example, titled “Cane Ridge through Billy Graham,” Bloom explores the enthusiastic revivalism of Barton Stone, who broke away from Presbyterianism to found what he regarded as the finally and fully restored apostolic church: the Church of Christ (Disciples). In his *Memoirs*, Stone wrote, “Calvinism is among the heaviest clogs on Christianity in the world,” even from the very beginning of its assumptions, “its first link is total depravity.”<sup>20</sup>

Later Bloom states,

A full generation before Emerson came to his spiritual maturity, the frontier people experienced their giant epiphany of Gnosis at Cane Ridge. Their ecstasy was no more communal than the rapture at Woodstock; each barking Kentuckian or prancing yippie barked and pranced for himself alone.... American ecstasy is solitary, even when it requires the presence of others for the self’s glory.<sup>21</sup>

Bloom adds,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 260.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 264.

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What was missing in all this quite private luminosity, was simply most of historic Christianity.... I hasten to add that I am celebrating, not deploring, when I make that observation.... Jesus is not so much an event in history for the American Religionist as he is a knower of the secrets of God who in return can be known by the individual. Hidden in this process is a sense that depravity is only a lack of saving knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

This intuitive, direct, and immediate knowledge is set over against the historically mediated forms of knowledge. What an American knows in his or her heart is more certain than the law of gravity.

So the *deeds, not creeds* orientation of American revivalism is driven not only by a preference for works over faith (Pelagianism) but by the Gnostic preference for a private, mystical, and inward *personal relationship with Jesus* in opposition to everything public, doctrinal, and external to the individual soul. Religion is formal, ordered, corporate, and visible; spirituality is informal, spontaneous, individual, and invisible.

As sweeping as it may first appear, there are clear similarities between fundamentalism and Pentecostalism on one hand and Protestant liberalism on the other. In fact, one reason that these forms of religion have survived modernity, against all expectations to the contrary, is that they not only can accommodate modernity's privatization of faith as an inner experience but can thrive in this atmosphere. As I observed especially in relation to the Pelagian emphases of Finney and his legacy, the seeds of liberalism were already sown by a revivalistic heritage that is shared by many conservative evangelicals. Repeatedly in the last few centuries we have seen how easily an inner-directed pietism turns to the vinegar of liberalism. One example is a statement by Wilhelm Herrmann, a liberal Pietist whose statement early in the twentieth century could be heard in many evangelical circles then as now: "To fix doctrines ... into a system is the last thing the Christian Church should undertake.... But if, on the other hand, we keep our attention fixed on what God is producing in the Christian's inner life, then the manifoldness of the thoughts which spring from faith will not confuse us, but give us cause for joy."<sup>23</sup>

For liberals, Christian morality, piety, and experience could survive the abandonment of Christian doctrine and even the formal, public, corporate service of Word and sacrament. The inner light was not extinguished by abandoning creedal Christianity because one could still have a stirring personal relationship with Jesus within the heart even if he was

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>23</sup> Wilhelm Herrmann, *Communion with God* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1913), 16.

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not raised bodily in history. Evangelicals are obviously not liberals, but the dominant orientation seems to put them perpetually on that trajectory.

It is not surprising, then, that today's fundamentalists eventually become tomorrow's liberals, in recurring cycles that pass through stages of intense controversy. Bloom follows a similar narrative in relation to Gnosticism. For example, although he overestimates the influence of E. Y. Mullins, as if he single-handedly shaped the Southern Baptist denomination, Bloom points out that Mullins's core assumptions were basically the same as those of Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James. The Gnostic impulse is evident, for example, in the doctrine of *soul competency*, which became prominent especially through Mullins.

While Luther, Calvin, and their heirs sought to reform the church, the more radical Protestant movements have sought an immediate, inner gnosis. Where the Reformers pointed to the external ministry of the church, centering on Word and sacrament, as the place where God promised to meet his people, *enthusiasm* (the Reformers' term for radical Protestant groups) was suspicious of everything external. Similarly, Emerson resigned his Unitarian pulpit at least in part because he was unwilling to celebrate the Lord's Supper (although it is unclear to me why Unitarians would retain the rite anyway). His reason was that he could abide nothing external, creaturely, or physical violating the immediacy of his divine soul with the Divine Spirit. His arguments were not that far from that of the Quakers in their rejection of baptism and the Lord's Supper by appealing to the doctrine of the inner light.

Although evangelicals typically retain the sacraments, like everything else, they are made a vehicle of individual experience—a personal relationship—that does not depend on such practices. Everything turns on the self-reliant soul of the individual to experience a direct and unmediated relationship with Jesus. If baptism or the Lord's Supper can facilitate a direct experience with the “naked God,” we will add them to the list of useful rungs on our ladder. They may be acceptable as long as they are our means of ascent, but calling them “means of grace” (that is, a ladder from God to us rather than from us to God) provokes controversy. In the history of American (and to some extent British) evangelicalism, the fear of sacraments (as opposed to ordinances) was expressed as a legitimate response to the perpetual threat of Romanism.

In all likelihood, however, the real source of unease was that evangelicalism has listed toward Gnosticism: nothing can be allowed to get in the way of my personal and utterly unique relationship with Jesus. E. Y. Mullins was not saying anything that was not already elaborated by American transcendentalists when he wrote, “That which we know

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most indubitably are the facts of inner experience."<sup>24</sup> "A thorough pragmatist, deeply influenced by William James, Mullins grounded his faith upon 'experience' in James's sense."<sup>25</sup> The individual believer, alone with his or her Bible, was all that was necessary for a vital Christian experience.

Bloom quotes Mullins's axiom, "Religion is a personal matter between the soul and God."<sup>26</sup> This may be the most agreed-upon dogma in the United States today.

With great insight (and affirmation), Bloom points out how writers like Mullins simply translated the Bible into a uniquely American language. According to Mullins, William James "explains the fact of regeneration in terms which are quite in harmony with those of the Pauline epistles." Therefore, Bloom concludes, "Pragmatic, experiential, and American as he was, Mullins almost involuntarily translated Paul into Jamesian terms. The primacy of human feeling is not the dynamic of Paul's work, but it is of James's and of Mullins's."<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Bloom observes, triumphalism—the inability to face the depravity of the inner self even at its best—marks the Gnostic spirit.<sup>28</sup>

Other than in the East and the esoteric sects of the West, where but in the United States could an entire religion emerge in the nineteenth century that denies the reality of the body, illness, and death. According to Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, "Sin, illness, and death itself ... had come into the world because of 'the belief that Spirit materialized into a body, infinity became finity, or man, and the eternal entered the temporal.'"<sup>29</sup> Notice that her description of the source of our fall is Christianity's description of the source of our redemption: namely, the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of God the Son in the flesh. Gnostics are allergic to any talk about the reality of sin and death. Substituting the idea of *passing away* for *death*, Baker Eddy made a considerable—and, from a Christian point of view, considerably unfortunate—contribution to the English language.

For Bloom, two outstanding exceptions to this Gnostic trajectory are Karl Barth and J. Gresham Machen. "Barth knows the difference between the Reformed faith and Gnosis,"

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<sup>24</sup> Edgar Young Mullins, *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression* (Philadelphia: Roger Williams Press, 1917), 73; cited by Bloom, *The American Religion*, 204.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>26</sup> Edgar Young Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908), 53–54; cited by Bloom, *The American Religion*, 213.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>28</sup> "Triumphalism is the only mode in which Mullins and the Baptists read Romans," moving quickly through the incarnation and the cross to Romans 8: "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us" (v. 37 NIV), (Bloom, *The American Religion*, 213).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

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says Bloom, pointing out the critical divergence: the subjective experience of the self over God's objective word and work. Where Barth was confident in a transcendent God and deeply suspicious of human experience, morality, or religion as a way of scaling the wall separating Creator and creature, pietism and liberalism were locked in victory mode.<sup>30</sup>

The other anti-Gnostic figure, an American, is J. Gresham Machen. What we call fundamentalists, says Bloom, are really Gnostics of an anti-intellectual variety. If there were a possibility of an anti-Gnostic version of fundamentalism, says Bloom, such proponents "would find their archetype in the formidable J. Gresham Machen, a remarkable Presbyterian New Testament scholar at Princeton, who published a vehement defense of traditional Christianity in 1923, with the aggressive title *Christianity and Liberalism*." Bloom adds, "I have just read my way through this, with distaste and discomfort but with reluctant and growing admiration for Machen's mind. I have never seen a stronger case made for the argument that institutional Christianity must regard cultural liberalism as an enemy to faith." In contrast to this defense of traditional Christianity, those who came to be called fundamentalists are more like "the Spanish Fascism of Franco, ... heirs of Franco's crusade against the mind, and not the legatees of Machen."<sup>31</sup>

In short, "The Calvinist deity, first brought to America by the Puritans, has remarkably little in common with the versions of God now apprehended by what calls itself Protestantism in the United States." Again, as Bloom himself points out, Philip Lee's *Against the Protestant Gnostics* makes almost the same arguments, with many of the same historical examples. What makes Bloom's account a little more interesting is that he champions the American religion and hopes for even greater gains for Gnosticism in the future. A "revival of Continental Reformed Protestantism is precisely what we do not need," according to Bloom.<sup>32</sup>

Sociological analyses of contemporary American spirituality, especially those of Wade Clark Roof, Robert Wuthnow, Robert Bellah, Marsha Witten, Anne Douglas, and James D. Hunter, have documented the dominant characteristics that seem to me to justify the comparisons that Bloom has highlighted.

Although Roof does not mention the ancient heresy, his description of contemporary American spirituality picks up Gnosticism's main characteristics: a religion that "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,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 228–29.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 259.

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caring images of deity,” which can even be described as “feminine and androgynous,” over images of God as Creator, Redeemer, Lord, and Judge.<sup>33</sup>

According to Hunter, “The spiritual aspects of evangelical life are increasingly approached by means of and interpreted in terms of ‘principles,’ ‘rules,’ ‘steps,’ ‘laws,’ ‘codes,’ ‘guidelines,’ and the like.”<sup>34</sup> 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.”<sup>35</sup>

Like ancient Gnosticism, contemporary American approaches to spirituality—however different conservative and liberal versions may appear on the surface—typically underscore the inner spirit as the locus of a personal relationship. As conservative Calvary Chapel founder Chuck Smith expresses it, “We meet God in the realm of our spirit.”<sup>36</sup> This view is so commonplace that it seems odd to hear it challenged.

Philip Lee’s contrast between Gnosticism and Calvinism can be just as accurately documented from a wide variety of Christians through the ages: “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.”<sup>37</sup> In fact, for the Reformers, adds Lee, the new birth was the opposite of “rebirth into a new and more acceptable self”; it was the death of the old self and its rebirth in Christ.<sup>38</sup>

Like ancient Gnosticism, American spirituality uses God or the divine as something akin to an energy source. Through various formulas, steps, procedures, or techniques, one may *access* this source on one’s own. Such spiritual technology could be employed without any need for the office of preaching, administering baptism or the Lord’s Supper, or membership in a visible church, submitting to its communal admonitions, encouragements, teaching, and practices.

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<sup>33</sup> Roof, *A Generation of Seekers*, 195.

<sup>34</sup> James Davison Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 75.

<sup>35</sup> Roof, *A Generation of Seekers*, 195.

<sup>36</sup> Chuck Smith, *New Testament Study Guide* (Costa Mesa, CA: Word for Today, 1982), 113.

<sup>37</sup> Philip Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 144.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

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According to Roof's studies, "The distinction between 'spirit' and 'institution' is of major importance" to spiritual seekers today. "Spirit is the inner, experiential aspect of religion; institution is the outer, established form of religion." He adds, "Direct experience is always more trustworthy, if for no other reason than because of its 'inwardness' and 'withinness'—two qualities that have come to be much appreciated in a highly expressive, narcissistic culture."<sup>39</sup>

Again, these studies point up the fact that evangelical pietism and revivalism are uniquely equipped to thrive in American culture. Even the popular Keswick "Higher Life" movement in British and American evangelicalism, which profoundly shaped evangelical piety in the nineteenth century, was criticized early on by B. B. Warfield and more recently by J. I. Packer as advancing an almost magical view of faith, *using* God like electricity for one's own ends and will.<sup>40</sup> Like a mighty river, the Spirit can be harnessed by our spiritual technology. The way many evangelicals today speak of *accessing* God and *connecting* with him underscores this point.

Just as there were legalistic and antinomian versions of ancient Gnosticism, contemporary spirituality can take fundamentalist and liberal forms. Yet they all give precedence to inner experience over external norms, the individual over the communion of saints, the immaterial over the material; the immediate, spontaneous, ever-new, and ever-unique personal experiences over the ordinary means of grace that God has provided for our maturity together in the body of Christ. Profoundly aware of our difference from God, not only as creatures but also as sinners, biblical faith underscores the need for mediation. God finds us by using his own creation as his "mask" behind which he hides so he can serve us. The Gnostic, by contrast, needs no mediation. God is not external to the self; in fact, the human spirit and the divine Spirit are already a unity.

The net effect of this pervasive American spirituality has been to assimilate God to our own experience, felt needs, and aspirations. As the architects of modern atheism such as Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud saw with tremendous insight, religion is easily reduced to anthropology—or even psychology. It is not a matter of actually being surprised by the voice of a stranger, calling us outside ourselves, as we are stripped of our pretensions and stand naked before a holy God. Rather, it is a projection of the self's own longings for comfort in the face of a vast and foreboding cosmos teeming with dangers and disasters. The line between religion and magic, faith in God and using God, becomes virtually indistinguishable.

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<sup>39</sup> Roof, *A Generation of Seekers*, 23, 30, 67.

<sup>40</sup> J. I. Packer cites Warfield's criticism and concurs in "Keswick and the Reformed Doctrine of Sanctification," *Evangelical Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (July 1955): 153–67.

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To the extent that churches in America today feel compelled to accommodate their message and methods to these dominant forms of spirituality, they lend credence to the thesis that Christianity is not news based on historical events but just another form of therapy. If this were the only path of true religion, the argument of modern atheism would offer the best explanation of the whole phenomenon. We never really meet God—someone who is different from us, who stands over against us in judgment and grace—but only ourselves in the mirror of our own utterly unique, private, and extraordinary experience. Measured by this Gnostic sentiment, Protestant liberalism in the line of Schleiermacher and Protestant evangelicalism in the line of pietism and revivalism differ perhaps in degree but not in their basic religious outlook.

## The New Testament and Gnosticism

Scholars are still debating the exact relationship between the New Testament and Gnosticism. While Gnosticism became a loosely organized movement with various sects only in the second century, incipient forms were already emerging in Jewish and Christian circles in the apostolic era. The apostle Paul spoke of the super-apostles as those who are “puffed up with conceit” and are “depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain” (1 Tim. 6:4–5). Such a person “teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and teaching that accords with godliness” (v. 3). Paul warns Timothy to “flee these things,” teaching believers to be content with God’s provisions.

Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.... O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called “knowledge” [*gnosis*], for by professing it some have swerved from the faith. Grace be with you.

1 Timothy 6:12, 20–21

Paul’s counsel in Romans 16 is equally pertinent:

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles *contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught*; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and *by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive*. For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Romans 16:17–20; emphasis added

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Plagued by sectarian strife, the Corinthian church had apparently been infected with the teaching that the body is either evil or inconsequential, leading to extremes of both legalistic proscriptions against sexual intercourse or antinomian license—since the acts done in the body could not taint the purity of the inner spirit (1 Cor. 5; 6:12–7:40). Paul answers both by declaring, “The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” (1 Cor. 6:13–15). Paul’s emphasis on the Lord’s Supper and defense of bodily resurrection against false teachers (chap. 15) testify further to the existence of this proto-gnostic circle and its influence. He also counters an ascetic form of this heresy in Colossians 2. John directly challenges “the spirit of the antichrist,” the denial that Jesus has come in the flesh (1 John 4:1–3, 6).

It is not surprising that John’s Gospel emphasizes not only Christ’s deity, but the marvelous—and scandalous—truth that “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). Not a universal spiritual or moral idea, but a particular human person who lived, suffered, died, rose again, and will come again in the flesh.

Evangelicals, of course, have courageously defended the historicity of Christ’s bodily resurrection and return in glory against the dogmatic anti-supernaturalism of liberalism. At the same time, when it comes to popular piety, both evangelicals and liberals (to the extent that they share a common heritage in pietism) often emphasize the immediacy of Jesus to our experience more than the reality of his bodily resurrection, ascension, and return. Whenever this happens, however important these dogmas may be for defending Christ’s deity, his humanity seems to play a minor role. For example, why should we long for Jesus Christ’s appearing in the flesh when he already lives in our heart? As one gospel song puts it, “You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart,” but this is a sentiment that could just as easily warm the heart of any liberal Protestant. It makes no difference whether Jesus rose from the dead in the flesh two thousand years ago, as long as he is somehow “still with us” in our personal experience today.

In sharp contrast, Paul defended the resurrection in the flesh as a datable event with eyewitnesses. John begins his letter of warning about the “antichrists” who deny that Christ has come in the flesh by immediately stating, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it” (1 John 1:1–2). Similarly, Peter testifies, “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Peter 1:16). It is significant that for the apostles, offering their testimony meant witnessing to

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the concrete person and work of Christ in history, where for us today it usually means witnessing to our personal experience and moral improvement.

Because the Spirit is sent to testify concerning Christ, give us faith in Christ, unite us to Christ, and keep us in Christ, the Spirit's indwelling of every believer as a first installment on our final salvation establishes the most vital and intimate link between the Head and his members. Nevertheless, it is the Spirit, not Jesus, who lives within us. Jesus is in heaven, exalted in his flesh at the Father's right hand, to return in the flesh at the end of the age, raising us up in the flesh to life everlasting as his coheirs. When the Spirit is turned into an abstract principle rather than a concrete person of the Trinity or his person and work are regarded as a distraction from rather than mediation of Christ's person and work, our faith—regardless of whatever official dogmas to which we yield our assent—loses its connection to the Jesus of history who has come and will come again in the flesh.

It is the Spirit who convicts us inwardly of our sin and drives us outside of ourselves to Christ, not only in the message of the gospel to which he testifies but in the creaturely, public, and external means that he employs to do so. In this way, Christ and his saving work not only remain outside of us but penetrate our hearts so deeply that we are truly transformed and continually transformed by his grace. Therefore, intimacy and personal fellowship with Christ by his Spirit through the means of grace are not eliminated but secured—but without simply collapsing Jesus into our inner experience. It is not in a private inner garden where we walk and talk with Jesus and he tells us that we are his own, but in a public garden with visible means of grace. There he forms a people, not just a person, by consecrating ordinary human speech as his Word, ordinary water as his baptism, and ordinary bread and wine as his Communion. The one who assumed our flesh by the power of the Spirit continues to work in us that faith and repentance through physical means in the power of the same Spirit.

Even now, the new birth is not the emancipation of a supposedly truer *inner self* from the external reality of history and the body, but the pledge (*arrobōn*) of the consummation for which the whole creation waits eagerly (Rom. 8:18–25). Unable to bring final liberation of humanity apart from leaving everything creaturely behind, Gnosticism loses the joy of the Christian gospel that leaves nothing behind but sin and death.

Gnosticism's success in the ancient church was due largely to its attempt to blend Greek wisdom with vaguely Christian concepts, but the result was a scheme that was in fact the very opposite of Christianity. Instead of accommodating the biblical story to pagan philosophy, as the super-apostles were doing, Paul told the Corinthians:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of

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the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.... And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

1 Corinthians 1:18–24; 2:1–2

## The Flight of the Lonely Soul

Longing for Christ’s return, the Christian is world-weary because this age lies under the power of sin and death. But even now there is a new power set loose in the world—the penetration of this present evil age with the powers of the age to come. So the Christian is longing for the final liberation of creation, not *from* creation. Precisely because the believer is rooted in the age to come, of which the Spirit’s indwelling presence is the down payment, there is a simultaneous groaning in the face of the status quo and confidence in God’s promise to make all things new.

By contrast, the Gnostic self is rootless, restless, weary of the world not because of its bondage to sin but because it is *worldly*, longing not for its sharing in the liberation of the children of God but in its freedom at last from creation’s company. Not the transformation of our times and places, but the transcendence of all times and places is the goal of Gnostic flight. “Taking no root,” wrote nineteenth-century American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, “I soon weary of any soil in which I may be temporarily deposited. The same impatience I feel, or conceive of, as regards this earthly life.”<sup>41</sup> Add to this philosophical orientation the practical transience of contemporary life that keeps us blowing like a tumbleweed across the desert, and Gnosticism can be easily seen to jibe with our everyday experience. Uprooted, we rarely live anywhere long enough even to be transplanted. Flitting like a bumblebee from flower to flower of religious, spiritual, moral, psychic, and even familial and sexual identities, our generation actually finds it plausible that there can be genuine communities on the Internet.

Gnosticism identified God with the inner self, but Christianity has focused all of its resources on God outside of us, who creates, rules, judges, and saves us in our complete

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<sup>41</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, cited in Vernon L. Parrington, *The Romantic Revolution in America*, vol. 2 of *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), 441–42.

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personal and corporate existence. It stands to reason that in the Gnostic scheme the inner self could stand above (even over against) not only the external church but its external ministry of preaching and sacrament, discipline and order, catechesis and communion. After all, it is not the public, historical, visible, and messy world that concerns Gnostics but the private, spiritual, invisible, and manageable world of the inner spirit.

With Bishop C. FitzSimons Allison, I confess my own natural attraction to the glory story over the story of the cross:

As an example of a sinful view of doctrine, I myself feel a great gravitational tug toward Gnostic distortions. I do not like suffering. I would like a religion that saved me from my own and other people's suffering. The whole incarnational theme in Christianity opens me up to the vulnerability of suffering. Yet in spite of my natural proclivities much of the grace I have known has been in that very suffering the gospel has drawn me into, the fellowship of Christ's passion.... I also have a heart for that aspect of Arianism that needs no rescuer and for Nestorianism that panders to my natural Pelagian self-righteousness, that poisonous aspect of my natural self-centeredness that precludes any compassion for sinners and makes me anything but a winsome example of a disciple of Christ.<sup>42</sup>

But the glory story is not all it's cracked up to be. Jean-Paul Sartre recognized that "we are condemned to be free," living like Atlas with the world on our shoulders. That is the glory story, whatever its version. Yet Jesus promises, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32 NKJV). That is because the truth that Jesus proclaims—and the Truth that Jesus *is*—remains for all ages, even for Americans, "the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> C. FitzSimons Allison, "Reflections on Modern Reformation," *Modern Reformation* 16, no. 1 (January–February 2007): 13.

<sup>43</sup> Horton, M. (2008). *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 159-187.