



A SUMMARY OF

The American Religion

Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

Editorial Note: The renowned literary critic, Harold Bloom (b. July 11, 1930), is “known for his innovative interpretations of literary history and of the creation of literature. . . . [Bloom] attended Cornell (B.A., 1951) and Yale (Ph.D., 1955) universities and began teaching at Yale in 1955 . . .”¹ He was appointed Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale University in 1983. He has authored scores of treatises.²

In *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*, Bloom has written from his perspective as an avowed “Gnostic Jew.”³ This volume has been termed “a great bolt of originality [in which the author] . . . manages to wade into a hopelessly over-explored territory and point out precisely those landmarks that everyone else has missed.”⁴

Background

BEFORE SUMMARIZING Harold Bloom’s understanding of American Gnosticism, it is essential to address the nature of “Gnosticism” itself. “The designation *Gnosticism*, derived from the Greek *gnostikos* (one who has *gnosis*, or ‘secret knowledge’), is a term of modern scholarship.”⁵ However, the concept of such “secret knowledge” had its origins in ancient Egyptian mythology.⁶

In the Gnostic view, the unconscious self of man is consubstantial with the Godhead, but because of a tragic fall it is thrown into a world that is completely alien to its real being. Through revelation from above, man becomes conscious of his origin, essence, and transcendent destiny. Gnostic revelation is to be distinguished both from philosophical enlightenment, because it cannot be acquired by the forces of reason, and from Christian revelation, because it is not rooted in history and transmitted by Scripture. It is rather the intuition of the mystery [self-evidency] of the self.⁷

While there are numerous patterns in the mythical fabric of Gnosticism, they all have the common thread that mankind (or at least a certain portion of mankind) possesses the knowledge (*gnosis*) of itself as divinity. This knowledge embraces the conviction that the self has always been divine, that it has become divine, or that it is destined to be divine. This knowledge therefore contends that the “inner self” is God, possesses God, or is possessed by God.

Gnosticism embraces the conviction that the self has always been divine, that it has become divine, or that it is destined to be divine.

Furthermore, this deified self is believed to be self-existent and therefore dwells in utter isolation or solitude from everyone and everything else. Such isolation is allegedly a manifestation of selfhood’s ultimate freedom. This isolation is also the reason why Gnostics and Gnosticism are committed to concealing their identity. To divulge their identity through overt expression or action would compromise their freedom, their isolation, and expose themselves to unnecessary ridicule. Exposing their hidden knowledge (*gnosis*) would also strip them of their assumed unapproachable, immovable and impassible nature as divinity. Finally, unmasking their identity would cripple their concealed use of existing economic, social, political and religious power structures to exercise controlled violence in order to fulfill their purposes, achieve their meaning, and establish their ultimate values. With respect to values, Gnostics contend that they have moved beyond the primary virtues of faith, hope and love and have achieved the ultimate value of *gnosis* — the “higher consciousness” and all-knowingness of God himself. Gnostics are therefore convinced that they have risen above and exist apart from all sin, evil and depravity.

Fundamentally, Gnostics believe that

[t]he world, produced from evil matter and possessed by evil demons, cannot be a creation of a good God; it is mostly conceived of as an illusion, or an abortion, dominated [according to Christian Gnosticism] by Yahweh, the Jewish demiurge, whose creation and history are depreciated. This world is therefore alien to God, who is for the Gnostics depth and silence, beyond any name or predicate, the absolute, the source of good spirits who together form the *pleroma*, or realm of light.⁸

Gnostic views of one’s own divine selfhood have been held by the most diverse belief groups — pagan, Jewish, Christian, Oriental, New Age, etc. Today we are witnessing a powerful resurgence of Gnosticism, determined to rid itself of the created order, of everything and everyone else, and to assert its own untrammelled deity. This modern Gnosticism has its origins and launched its mission in America and in American religion.

Gnostic views of one’s own divine selfhood have been held by the most diverse belief groups — pagan, Jewish, Christian, Oriental, New Age.

American religion(s), in turn, trace their origins to the psyche (mindset or worldview) of early American pioneers. Most settlers left Europe for America out of a sense of dispossession, persecution or subjugation. Just as the Israelites had

left Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and reached the Promised Land of Canaan, so the settlers imagined that they had left European bondage, crossed the Atlantic “Red Sea,” and entered the “Promised Land” of America. As the pioneers conquered the vast wilderness of North America, they understandably gained a new consciousness of themselves, their new freedom, and their new self-identity.

Summary

In the following summary of *The American Religion*, only a selection of the author’s most significant observations regarding the modern reemergence of Gnosticism are included.

Gnosticism and the American Religion

. . . American religion . . . [is] irretrievably Gnostic. It is a knowing, by and of an uncreated self, or self-within-the-self, and the knowledge leads to freedom, a dangerous and doom-eager freedom: from nature, time, history, community, other selves.⁹

The self is the truth, and there is a spark at its center that is best and oldest, being the God within.¹⁰

Freedom, in the context of the American Religion, means being alone with God or with Jesus, the American God or the American Christ. In social reality, this translates as solitude, at least in the inmost sense. The soul stands apart, and something deeper than the soul, the Real Me or self or spark, thus is made free to be utterly alone with a God who is also quite separate and solitary, that is, a free God or God of freedom. What makes it possible for the self and God to commune so freely is that the Self already is of God; unlike body and even soul, the American self is no part of the Creation, or of evolution through the ages. The American self is not the Adam of Genesis but is a more primordial Adam, a Man before there were men or women. Higher and earlier than the angels, this true Adam is as old as God, older than the Bible, and is free of time, unstained by mortality. Whatever the social and political consequences of this vision, its imaginative strength is extraordinary. No American pragmatically feels free if she is not alone, and no American ultimately concedes that she is part of nature.¹¹

“The American self is not the Adam of Genesis but is a more primordial Adam.... Higher and earlier than the angels, this true Adam is as old as God.”

Fundamentalism and the American Religion

Fundamentalism . . . took its name from a sequence of tracts called *The Fundamentals* that were issued between 1910 and 1915 in the United States, and the movement became institutionalized in 1919 and 1920, as *Fundamentalism* became a formal and militant party [known for its emphasis on biblical inerrancy and on Creationism]. . . .

Groups like the Moral Majority, founded by Fundamentalist evangelist Jerry Falwell, demonstrated how effective the television ministry of the movement could be. The Fundamentalists concentrated political energies on opposition to abortion, support of an amendment that would permit prayer in public schools, and identification with the causes of Israel and a strong military defense budget.¹²

For Fundamentalists, however,

[t]he true issue is by no means Biblical Inerrancy, because the Fundamentalists, as unwitting Gnostics, do not believe anyway that God made *them*. Their deepest knowledge is that they were no part of the Creation, but existed as spirits before it, and so are as old as God himself. . . . What wounds them unforgivingly is not the idea of evolution . . . but the demonstration that they were never God, or part of God. Their sense of their freedom depends ultimately upon being free not only of time and of nature but, more secretively, being free of the very Creationism they urge upon all the rest of us.¹³

“Their sense of their freedom depends ultimately upon being free not only of time and of nature but, more secretively, being free of the very Creationism they urge upon all the rest of us.”

Furthermore, Fundamentalists on the question of abortion,

[b]eing Gnostics, . . . value the unborn over the born, because the Creation and the Fall truly were the same event. The fetus is innocent, but the new-born babe is sadly fallen away from freedom. . . . [T]he baby is not alone, and will drain the pious taxpayer, but the fetus can wave over the land of the free, whose Fundamentalists will remain solitary and godlike, poised always *before* the Creation.¹⁴

“The fetus is innocent, but the new-born babe is sadly fallen away from freedom.”

Southern Baptists and the American Religion

Taken all together, the Baptists are the largest of all our Protestant faiths, and the most experiential in their religious approach. . . .

[One of the largest groups, t]he Southern Baptist Convention, was born in 1845; a century and a half later, it might almost be called the Southern American Religion . . .¹⁵

No Southern Baptist . . . will believe me when I tell them that they are subject and object of their own quest. This most aggressive of Protestantisms is no Protestantism at all, but a pure outflaring again of an ancient Gnosis. The Jesus who is sought is already both principle and particle in the soul that seeks him. Nothing that I have perceived of the American Religion is more persuasive than the image of the Southern Baptist alone in the garden with Jesus.¹⁶

“This most aggressive of Protestantisms is no Protestantism at all, but a pure outflaring again of an ancient Gnosis.”

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.¹⁷

The Baptist experience of knowing Jesus, in a solitary and renewable encounter, takes priority over public worship, doctrine, or acts of charity. And since what can know Jesus, in some way already is akin to Jesus, then the saved Baptist participates *now* in the Resurrection and the Life. . . . If one's undying spirit accepts the love of Jesus, walks with the resurrected Jesus, *knows* what it is to love Jesus in return, alone with Jesus in the only permanent and perfect communion that ever will be, then there can be no churchly authority over one.¹⁸

The Baptist soul and Jesus, in their mutual act of acquaintance, renew an ancient Gnosis . . .¹⁹

[In this situation] Creator and creature are indistinguishable, and the dualism of body and soul is abrogated, so that the Baptist mystic already *knows* what it is to have been resurrected.²⁰

Pentecostalism and the American Religion

Pentecostalism . . . has more in common with certain aspects of the Fundamentalist majority in the Southern Baptist Convention than it does with . . . [other] sects. Like the Southern Baptists, the Pentecostals manifest an almost wholly experiential faith, but the Pentecostal mode of experience . . . [involves] "their cultivation of ecstasy" . . .²¹

Ecstasy . . . always has been the essence of the American Religion. How could it be otherwise? To know that one's own spirit is part of the Holy Spirit, existent before the foundation of the world, is an exhilarating experience. To know that one is completely free . . . because one's solitude is shared with the Holy Spirit, carries the rapture to a Sublime elevation. . . . And what is the Holy Spirit to an American Pentecostal, if it is not the power to negate the survival of that self.²²

Mormonism and the American Religion

Mormonism was founded in upstate New York by Joseph Smith [1830] after he had allegedly translated by revelation the *Book of Mormon*, which recounts the history of certain tribes of Israel that migrated to America centuries before Christ and underwent experiences similar to those recounted in the Old Testament. [Today t]he principal formal body embracing Mormonism . . . [is] The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [and] is headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah.²³

. . . [T]he Mormon God is *not* a creator. Pragmatically, neither is the resurrected Jesus of the Moderate Southern Baptists. But I come here to a central argument of this book. The God of the American Religion is not a creator-God, because the American never *was* created, and so the American has at least part of the God within herself.²⁴

Though the Mormon God is not a "creator," he is a "begetter."

Mormons today are taught that all of us emerge from an unborn state where a god and his wife (or one of his wives) make love and so quite literally beget our spirits. After we die and are resurrected elsewhere, we will perform the same pleasant labor of begetting "spirit children" for later universes.²⁵

"There is something of Joseph Smith's [and of the Mormon] spirit in every manifestation of the American Religion."

There is something of Joseph Smith's [and of the Mormon] spirit in every manifestation of the American Religion. Joseph *knew* that he was no part of the creation, *knew* that what was best and oldest in

him already was God. And he knew also, more humanly, that despite his prophetic vocation and communal vision, he was essentially alone, and could experience his own spiritual freedom only in prophetic solitude.²⁶

Some Consequences of the American Religion

Ancient Gnosticism . . . was the most elitist and negative of theologies. It is the dubious achievement of the darker versions of the American Religion that have democratized Gnosticism. . . . The societal consequences of debasing the Gnostic self into selfishness, and the believer's freedom from others into the bondage of others, are to be seen everywhere, in our inner cities and in our agrarian wastelands.²⁷

Humanly there is something quite cold about the religion of our climate. Our sacred frenzies are directed towards ourselves or towards the resurrected Jesus . . . Pentecostals and many other sectarians . . . experience a sacred violence as the Spirit hits them, but the violence assimilates very quickly to American secular violence, altogether as prevalent in the countryside as in the cities. The American Religion in itself is not violence, but confusion frequently

attends both, and certainly our knowing is more often than not a violent knowing. A religion of the self is not likely to be a religion of peace, since the American self tends to define itself through its war against otherness. If your knowing ultimately tells you that you are beyond nature, having long preceded it, then your natural acts cannot sully you. No wonder, then, that salvation, once attained, cannot fall away from the American Religionist, no matter what he or she does. We export our culture abroad, low and high, and increasingly, we export the American Religion as well. If Woodrow Wilson proves correct, and we were intended to be a spirit among the nations of the world, then the twenty-first century will mark a full-scale return to the wars of religion.²⁸

“A religion of the self is not likely to be a religion of peace, since the American self tends to define itself through its war against otherness.”

Conclusion

Being a professed Gnostic himself, the author of *The American Religion* fails to address the fundamental tensions in postmodern America between what he calls “the American religion,” with its Gnostic tendencies, and the established religions of American culture, which claim their roots in European history. “European religions” retain the classic position of the early Christian church. The early church vigorously opposed Gnosticism and its present deification of mankind. It acted to form the canon to exclude the Gnostic experiential spirituality. It convened councils to build doctrinal bulwarks against Gnosticism. And the church established the episcopacy as the visible authority of the church over against the authority of divinized individualist experience.

The early church vigorously opposed Gnosticism and its present deification of mankind. It acted to form the canon to exclude the Gnostic experiential spirituality.

Now, over 1,500 years later, the strenuous efforts of established churches to contain Gnosticism are collapsing. Here in America, at least, we are rapidly reaching an “anthropological . . . crisis.”²⁹ Only the full revealment of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the truth of the Creator-God’s own disclosure to mankind as the Human One can prevent the self-destruction of a race delusively contending for its own divinity. Together, let us hope, pray and otherwise strive to help Americans and the onlooking world fulfill their historic dream for true freedom *with* Christ — not *as* Christ.

Endnotes

1. *Britannica Online*, s.v. “Harold Bloom,” at www.britannica.com/biography/Harold-Bloom.
2. See *Who’s Who in America*, 46th ed., 1990-1991, s.v. “Bloom, Harold.”
3. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 22.
4. *Kirkus Reviews*, back cover. See Bloom, *American Religion*.
5. *Britannica Online*, s.v. “Gnosticism,” at www.britannica.com/topic/gnosticism.
6. See Karl W. Luckert, chap. 17, “Gnosis Competition,” *Egyptian Light and Hebrew Fire: Theological and Philosophical Roots of Christendom in Evolutionary Perspective* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 291-308.
7. *Britannica Online* (early edition), s.v. “Gnosticism.”
8. *Ibid.*
9. Bloom, *American Religion*, p. 49.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
12. *Britannica Online* (early edition), s.v. “Protestantism: History of the Protestant Movement: Protestantism in the 20th Century: Conservative and Evangelistic Forms of Protestantism: Fundamentalism.”
13. Bloom, *American Religion*, pp. 56, 57.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 191, 192.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
17. C. Austin Miles, “In the Garden” (1912).
18. Bloom, *American Religion*, p. 205.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 209.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 176, 177.
23. *Britannica Online* (early edition), s.v. “Mormon.”
24. Bloom, *American Religion*, p. 114.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 127, 128.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 258.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 264, 265.
29. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1997), p. 275.

Explore the geographic distribution and demographics of America's major religious groups. Religions. Explore religious groups in the U.S. by tradition, family and denomination. Christian 70.6%. Evangelical Protestant 25.4%.

The notion of religious freedom has played a crucial role in the history of the United States, just as it has in the rest of North America. Because of this civil unrest with regard to religion, the American forefathers believed strongly in the idea of organizing the country in a way in which the separation of church and state was guaranteed. That guarantee was made official in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, which in full reads

Explore the geographic distribution and demographics of America's major religious groups. Religions. Explore religious groups in the U.S. by tradition, family and denomination. Christian 70.6%. Evangelical Protestant 25.4%.