

THE CHARISMATIC CHALLENGE TO MAINLINE CHRISTIANITY

Joseph M. Webb¹

One of the most far-reaching and puzzling enigmas within Christianity today concerns the continuing decline of mainline denominations and the concomitant growth of the charismatic denominations. While lines, admittedly, are difficult to draw, it is not only possible but necessary for us to conceptualize these two great overall traditions of those who go by the name Christian. The mainline denominations in decline are well known, among them Methodist, Disciple, Presbyterian, even Episcopal. What I will refer to as the charismatic denominations, sometimes called Pentecostal or Fundamentalist, include the Assemblies of God and its variations, most of the Baptist Church, and the new charismatics, the Calvary and Harvest style fellowships. The problem is not with the coexistence of different expressions of the Christian faith, something that should, in fact, be quite laudable; the distressing problem for those of us within mainline churches is that "they" are increasing while "we" are decreasing.²

What seems to me significant is that there is a decided shortage of serious attempts to account for this dual-sided religious (and/or social) phenomenon. On the charismatic side, there is little interest in or necessity for explaining it; and when an explanation is forthcoming it usually takes one of two forms. It is either because the charismatic churches have remained true to the gospel of Jesus Christ, while the "liberal" mainline churches have become embroiled in relativism and given up the gospel;³ or, it is

1 Joseph M. Webb is currently Visiting Professor of Communication and Media at California State University at Fullerton, and Director of the newly-established Institute on the Future of Preaching and Church. His latest book is Preaching Without Notes, to be published by Abingdon Press in January. Dr. Webb's e-mail address is jwebb@fullerton.edu.

2 Ironically, even within Roman Catholicism this phenomenon is quite visible, particularly in North and South America. Even though the charismatic groups are growing, they are neither very large nor very separated from the "mainline" of the Catholic Church yet. But that may be changing. Over the past Labor Day weekend, more than 12,000 Catholics who call themselves "charismatic" gathered at the Anaheim Convention Center in California, an event well covered by the LA media.

3 Read, for example, Thomas C. Reeves' The Empty Church: The Suicide of Liberal Christianity (New York: The Free Press, 1996). "Here," he says, "we are at the root of things: the submission of liberal Protestantism to a secular gospel rests upon a failure to accept the essentials of the Christian faith" (p. 175). Reeves reflects the prevailing view among charismatics about their mainstream counterparts: "Liberation theology, black theology, and especially feminist theology remained popular in the mainline seminaries, continuing to transform the study and practice of the faith into the polemics of socialist revolution, lesbian emancipation, ethnic and racial distinctiveness, radical environmentalism, and the like. Process theology, which began to attract attention after World War II and was important by this time, appealed to some interested in dense philosophical thought and eager to challenge orthodox Christianity. Postmodernism, a gospel of moral and cultural relativism popular in academia, was implicit if not explicit in much contemporary theology. By the mid-1990s, winds from the far left had blown powerfully in the liberal Protestant denominations for at least three decades" (p. 158).

because the charismatic churches have maintained discipline, strictness and even fanaticism, while the liberal mainline churches, again, have become wishy-washy and lost their "fire."⁴

On the mainline side, while some books say "do this" or "do that" in order to turn things around, there is virtually no systematic effort to think about what might be wrong. Instead, there is a kind of implied mourning which suggests that "we" are doing our best, and still we cannot get the people to come, or stay. Among the clergy, there is a persistent, and even pathetic, sense that the harder we work the deeper our congregations seem to sink. So we talk in terms of "spiritual growth," or more refined and tightly structured--if ever smaller--communities of faith. But through it all we seem to know that we may very well be blowing against the wind.

In this short paper, I want to suggest a line of thinking that I have been working with for some time now. I propose it not only as a way to contemplate the mainline problem, but as a way to do so without the usual judgmental cast over the us-versus-them dichotomy. What I propose also provides a paradigm, in my judgment, for making sense of a few significant things now emerging in some mainline church settings, as well as a way to indicate that we may be on the right track after all, if only we have the courage to go "the rest of the way."

For this analysis, I choose a word, a concept--an unusual but not unfamiliar one. The word is "gnosis," or, capitalized, "Gnostic." I am perfectly serious in my use of the term, though I fully understand that virtually everyone reading this knows it only as a label for an early Christian heresy called "gnosticism." I will use the word "gnostic" here, however, in its historical and descriptive senses, and not in the pejorative one of Christian tradition.⁵ I select the word for two major reasons. First, I use the word "gnostic" because a number of important secular scholars today are embracing it as a way

4 See, in particular, Dean M. Kelley, Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in the Sociology of Religion (Macon, GA, 1986). Kelley's view is that the conservative church is successful because it insists on "absolute and unswerving allegiance." There, one must be willing to "work, suffer, and die for it; abandon all competing activities, allegiance, and responsibilities in its favor; tell its Good News tirelessly and unselfconsciously to strangers; wear its stigmata of humiliation on their bodies; submit to its strictures, conformities, and disciplines; go where they are sent and do what they are told" (pp. 99-101).

5 The matter of defining "gnostic" and "gnosticism" is one which continues to press New Testament and Christian origins scholars. On one level, the words tend to be used (as is sometimes appropriate) synonymously. On another level, though, they can be distinguished--since "gnostic" tends to function as an adjective while "gnosticism" is used more as a noun. To be "gnostic" is to embody, at least to some degree, a particular view of the world, one which has historical roots and can now be fairly well defined. Gnosticism, on the other hand, remains a derogatory term most often used to designate a body of ideas or beliefs, whether religious or secular, with which one disagrees. The best definitional discussion I know of as far as these terms are concerned is in James Robinson's essay, "On Bridging the Gulf From Q to the Gospel of Thomas (Or Vice Versa)," in Nag Hammadi: Gnosticism and Early Christianity (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986).

to talk about a profound cultural change that has taken place over the past two centuries in the West, most notably in the United States--a sweeping change that is very germane to this study. Notable among these scholars are Harold Bloom and Bentley Layton, but there are others as well.

Second, I use the word since, from the middle of the twentieth century, we have been confronted with an entirely new understanding of ancient Gnosticism. This has resulted from the discovery of twelve large codices, containing almost 50 separate titles, of writings by second and third century gnostics, both Christian and secular. In other words, before that "find," we only knew of gnosticism through the broadside attacks of its church enemies, who successfully destroyed (or so it appeared) all vestiges of gnosticism and established a canon of Christian writing as free of gnostic thought or influence as possible.⁶ Now, though--for the first time--we know, in their own words, what the gnostics themselves believed, and why. *This* gives us, again for the first time, a close look at why that emerging institutional Christian Church and its leaders saw such a deep threat in Gnostic Christianity. Even beyond this, though, we are now able to connect that Gnostic Christian religion from the ancient past with Christian ideas and movements today. And that is where the biggest surprise of all seems to await us, as this paper will discuss.

Why raise the issue of gnosticism in this context? The reason is a contemporary one, since the subject of this study is contemporary. It is this: Over the past century, and probably longer, we have gradually seen the emergence of a new era, postmodern to some, though that is certainly not the only way to designate it. In fact, from another vantage point the era that has gradually come into being as we step into the twenty-first century may be called a "gnostic era"--something that will sound absurd to anyone who has never considered that possibility. But it is not absurd. In fact, it is stunningly true. And at this stage I am not talking about Christian Gnosticism, but about a full-blown secular gnosticism, a gnostic way of understanding and experiencing life in all of its aspects. As Harold Bloom has put it, "We now live, more than ever, in an America where a great many people are Gnostics without knowing it, which is a peculiar irony."⁷ Later, Bloom does turn to religion and religious gnosticism, ancient and modern, adding these telling words:

The enemies of Gnosis were and are triumphant, but only in the organizational and political sense. Historically, they seem to have won, but all victories over the spirit remain forever equivocal, and the spark or deepest self is never quite snuffed out. Authentic spirituality in the United

⁶ It is significant, of course, that in the last couple of decades, as we have learned about Gnostic Christianity from the Nag Hammadi cache, we have come to see that the New Testament documents are not nearly as free of gnostic influences as for centuries Christians had been led to believe. Even Paul, we are discovering, while believing that gnosticism was not an appropriate form of Christianity, was deeply influenced by several key gnostic doctrines.

⁷ Harold Bloom, Omens of Millenium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams and Resurrection (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), p. 27.

States, for nearly two centuries now, is essentially Gnostic.⁸

Other writers besides Bloom have made similar observations. In an essay at the end of the Nag Hammadi collection itself, Richard Smith discusses "the modern relevance of Gnosticism."⁹ He takes the evolution of contemporary gnosticism back even farther than Bloom does, actually finding its seeds in the Enlightenment. Like Bloom, though, he sees its contemporary emergence in the guise of Romanticism, a minority philosophical tradition to the dominant Western Rationalism--until the gradual breakdown of Rationalism in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Through the twentieth century, however, Romanticism gradually caught up to Rationalism as the prevailing Western (and American) philosophy. And, as many have observed, the turbulent 1960s signaled the triumph of Romanticism over Rationalism. For scholars like Bloom and Smith, gnosticism is a type of Romanticism, and it is by this covert route that gnostic ways of understanding have become so prevalent in American life today.

This is the necessary framework for my thesis about the relationship between declining mainstream Christianity and thriving charismatic Christianity. I am aware that we have so far not actually defined the gnostic perspective, or gnosticism. But, because of the space limitations of this paper, I will do that indirectly, as part of my discussion of charismatic Christianity. What I contend is this: That the charismatic denominations, unconsciously but vigorously, have embraced almost every major tenet of classical and contemporary gnosticism--giving each one a distinctly religious meaning and practice. These tenets, or doctrines, together provide what, in my judgment, can be described as a New Christian Gnosticism, as clear and passionate as 'any gnosticism of the past ever was. Moreover, it is this New Christian Gnosticism that has caught, full-blast, the mood and philosophy of the larger American secular gnosticism, of which Bloom and others speak. This New Christian Gnosticism, in short, is riding the wave of a still-growing cultural gnosticism. It is my contention that this convergence, more than anything else, explains the enormous across-the-board attractiveness of charismatic Christianity today. At the same time, it also explains, albeit indirectly, the sad but seemingly unstoppable flight of contemporary people, particularly young people, from mainline Christianity.

Saying this, however, requires that we deal with two key questions: First, what are those gnostic tenets or doctrines? And, second, how have the charismatic denominations embodied them in religious, or Christian, garb? I want to discuss seven of those beliefs, setting each one into its charismatic Christian context. After that, we will think briefly about the relationship between those gnostic beliefs and mainline Christianity; and finally suggest the challenge that all this presents to the future of the mainstream Christian traditions. Hence, we turn to the seven fundamental gnostic beliefs that have come to represent the core of charismatic Christianity:

⁸ Bloom, Omens of Millenium, p. 229.

⁹ See Richard Smith, "Afterword: The Modern Relevance of Gnosticism," in The Nag Hammadi Library (revised edition), edited by James M. Robinson (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978, 1988).

1. God speaks to people, including common people, personally and individually. God's voice is heard, of course, by those who are leaders of the church, its pastors, teachers and others, including those who maintain its structure--at least that has been the "orthodox" Christian view. But, for gnostics, that voice of God is heard just as well, just as frequently, and even just as authoritatively by ordinary, lay people, devout people without "standing" in the church. Moreover, what ordinary people hear is very often meant to be spoken aloud and heard by the larger congregation of believers.

In her now classic discussion of the gnostic writings of Nag Hammadi, Elaine Pagels asks why, even by the end of the first century, this idea of God speaking to common folk caused such an intense reaction within the new "orthodox," or non-gnostic, church. She answers by pointing to a very early letter attributed to Clement, called Bishop of Rome (c. 90-100); The letter deal with turmoil (again) in the church at Corinth, turmoil concerning whose voice was, in fact, the true voice of God for the church. Clement, she said, argues that God is the lord and master whom all must obey, but then the question is: how is God's rule actually administered in a church?

Here Clement's theology becomes practical: God, he says, delegates his 'authority of reign' to 'rulers and leaders on earth.' Who are these designated rulers? Clement answers that they are bishops, priests and deacons. Whoever refuses to 'bow the neck' and obey the church leaders is guilty of insubordination against the divine master himself. Carried away with his argument, Clement warns that whoever disobeys the divinely ordained authorities 'receives the death penalty.'¹⁰

The problem is clear. Clement's perspective, and his dictum, became the institutional "orthodox" church's rule. But it flew directly in the face of how the gnostics--and Gnostic Christians in particular--viewed God and their relationship with God. Very early, probably even in Paul's day, Gnostic Christianity seems to have been fairly strong, and one of its strongholds most likely was Corinth. One cannot read the letter of First Corinthians chapter 14 without thinking about gnostics in the church. They believed that they conversed directly with God, and, more importantly, that God spoke directly to them; and that they had a right to saw aloud, any way they wished, what God said to them in the midst of the congregation. Moreover, there is also gnostic evidence that when common people spoke of their experiences with God, what often came out was not rational thought at all, but was a kind of ecstatic babbling, the glossalalia of chapter 14, abstract trance-like sounds that no one could understand.

To look at charismatic Christianity today is to see a mirror image of that old gnosticism--Christian Gnosticism--revived in a new high-energy form. God still speaks to, and through, pastors, teachers and other kinds of leaders, however official or unofficial; but there is a widespread and very strong charismatic belief that messages come to the church as well through common people to whom God also speaks. This is why major parts of charismatic worship services and other meetings are given over to

10 Elaine Pagels. The Gnostic Gospels (New York: Random House, 1979). p. 34.

“testimonies,” to emotional lay recitations of what God has “said to you,” or “has done to you, or through you.” One stands and announces: “God gave me this message in a dream last night, or as I prayed last night, and told me to tell it to the church.” This is not just a form of mutual encouragement in those settings, but often it is seen as a collective word of guidance in some way to be heeded. Related to this, of course, is the intense revival over the past few decades of “speaking in tongues.” Whatever one believes about the practice, it is understood in most charismatic traditions as one of God’s ways of being heard and shared among common people.

Not surprisingly, the appeal of this “democratic--and direct--interaction with God has a profound appeal among some people who have believed that they could only approach God indirectly, through some human intermediary. In addition, over the past few decades we have entered a very anti-authoritarian era, one in which we all want to be our own bosses, our own authorities on everything, including our religion. The idea of having our “own light,” our own direct contact with the divine, is attractive beyond belief today--and it is also the very idea that lies near the heart of both secular and religious gnosticism.

2. The true God is truly found deep within oneself, “down deep in my heart.”
Gnosticism has been both a philosophy and a religion of inwardness, of radical subjectivity; it is not just a search for, but a clear affirmation of, the presence of God in the “deep self” of every human being. This is a major theme of the early Christian Gnostic writing that we now have. Distinctions are discussed between the psyche, or the “unconscious self,” and the still deeper pneuma, or spirit, that something which is said endure through eternity. Despite differences of viewpoint on such matters, though, gnostic writing is an unswerving and extraordinary concern with, and exploration of, the nature of spirituality. The Spirit Within does not arise from a book or from ritualistic exercise, but from probing self-examination and self-discovery.¹¹

This intense sense of spirituality also set early Gnostic Christianity at severe odds with the institutional Christianity that was emerging in the second and third centuries. The institutional church and its leaders were creating their “orthodoxy,” their doctrines and beliefs, their ritualistic forms of obedience and submission. By Gnostic Christians, captured by the Spirit God Within Themselves, did not believe that God lived in institutions and rituals, and they appear to have had no difficulty in saying so. In Bloom’s words, what those Gnostic Christians communicated was that “seeking God outside the self courts the disasters of dogma, institutional corruption, historical malfeasance, and cruelty.”¹²

¹¹ It is interesting, in retrospect, to think about a major theme in an old, and then very controversial, book, by Bishop John Robinson, Honest to God, published in 1963. One of the things that he argued throughout the book was that the traditional church, over time, had made a successful transition from a God who was “up there,” as in a three-story universe, to a God who was “out there.” Robinson contended, then, that the spatial metaphor of “out there” had also become outmoded, and that it was time for us to take seriously a God who was not “out there,” but “in here”--within us. It was a bold argument, one that came to be accepted--if not by orthodox theologians yet, at least by those who are not afraid of today’s Gnostic Christianity. But Robinson could see it coming.

¹² Bloom, p. 14.

We earlier noted Bloom's comment about the gnostic nature of American spirituality over the past two centuries. "Most Americans" since then, he added, "have sought the God within rather than the God of European Christianity."¹³ It is charismatic Christianity, in fact, that has made such a sharp turn away from the "orthodox" God of European Christianity and embraced the idea of the God Within. In doing so, charismatic churches have created the conditions, the openings and the encouragements for seeking and finding an internal God. God is a "personal" God, living within us, is the assertion. Do you accept God, Jesus, as your personal lord and savior? At one level, of course, this is a pietistic view of Christi an spirituality, though classical pietism usually implies a certain quietness and solitude; and charismatic Christianity is anything but quiet and reclusive. Still, it is about the state of the inner person--the "hem" --and how God speaks there. While ancient Gnostic Christians would not recognize all the forms of such charismatic religion, its roots are clearly in a gnostic sense of this "inner voice of God."¹⁴

3. Concern with religious doctrine or dogma is replaced by religious experience.

One, of course, begins to see a pattern emerge: from individualism to inwardness to experience--emotional, unbridled experience. This, too, was a crucial part of gnostic life, and, it appears, Christian Gnosticism. It was a key ingredient in the gnostic's grand sense of individual freedom, the freedom to be oneself and to express oneself however one wished, an idea that made ancient gnosticism so attractive to common folk. It is not unlike what one Catholic charismatic was quoted as saying at that meeting last Labor Day at the Anaheim Convention Center. He told a newspaper reporter: "I'm attracted to the freedom of praying out loud from our hearts, raising our hands, even dancing if we are so moved; it is different in every way from what you see in Mass on Sunday."

For gnostics, this was what religion was about. One could cast off inhibitions in order to express as openly as one wished what was "lighting up" one's soul. As a result, ancient gnostics--and Gnostic Christians--were often accused of a kind of libertinism, something that was expressly discouraged, though, in the Gnostic Christian writings that we have. Charismatic Christianity today knows all about this open emotional expression, and this is clearly an enormous part of its appeal. Moreover, we live in an age of self-expression; and charismatic worship is often a barely disciplined, sustained emotional

¹³ Bloom, p. 14.

¹⁴ It is very significant that another prominent writer, Robert Coles, also (as did Bloom) produce an end-of-the-twentieth-century book. His is titled, The Secular Mind (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). Coles traces the religious impulse from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth. He also argues that Americans, whether traditionally religious or not, have embraced a new inwardness, an all-out search within themselves, what he calls a new psychoanalytic religion. It takes many forms, of course, but at its root is a "conviction that impulses and goals and attitudes once connected to Judaism, to Christianity, to institutionalized religious life, have now become connected to a profession (psychoanalysis) that is prominent indeed among the bourgeoisie" (p 115). At another point, Coles says that "in a secular society many seek 'guidance' (moral as well as clinical) from doctors, from psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, rather than the clergy, hence the eagerness of so many ministers, priests, and rabbis to embrace 'pastoral counseling'" (p. 114).

unleashing.

Granted, in some more sedately suburban communities, Charismatic Christianity is less rowdy than one finds it on religious television. There, the preacher does not need a ready handkerchief for brow mopping, and the calls for "feeling, experiencing and expressing what is in your heart" are more restrained. But the theme of being free from dogma, free of stuffy doctrine of all kinds, free to follow the voice within one's own heart is the undergirding idea that, both in ancient times and in ours, is unmistakably appealing. In some ways, this latter expression of Charismatic Christianity is probably closer to the Gnostic Christianity of Valentinus, the foremost early Christian Gnostic leader, than the more overtly emotional forms--though they certainly existed in the first century.¹⁵

4. The door to salvation is not love (which is Pauline) but "knowing Jesus." In many ways, while this is not the most obvious element of gnostic thinking behind charismatic Christianity, it is one of the most important. While "to know and be known by Jesus" is not totally absent in New Testament writings (reflecting its own gnostic influences), it is generally understood that the theme there is "they will know we are Christians by our love, by our love." Or, in Paul's language, there is faith, hope, and, yes, knowledge, but the greatest of them all is love.

For Christian Gnostics, however, as important as love might be, salvation is bound up in the gnosis, in what one "knows" in one's heart. This, for classical gnosticism, was a full-blown self-knowing, since God resided deep in the self. In contemporary charismatic Christianity, self-knowing has become "Jesus knowing" in one's deepest self. The jump, though, is not a very big one, since how one "knows Jesus" in one's heart is a highly individualistic matter. Have you accepted Jesus into your heart? Do you know him? Do you know that he lives in you and has saved you? These are the salvation questions. They are also gnostic questions, however tweaked within the various charismatic traditions. In an age of "knowing," or "knowledge," an age in which "information" is power, it is not surprising that gnosis, even among those unfamiliar with that term, is a highly appealing perspective.

¹⁵ One of the major expressions of contemporary secular gnosticism is what has come to be called New Age thinking. While the very term is anathema to many Christians of all kinds today, its relationship to charismatic Christianity is, without question, its common gnostic root. In various of his writings, Harold Bloom addresses the issue of the New Age Movement and its gnostic underpinnings; and his observations, in my judgment, are thoughtful and useful. He writes: "Gnosticism needs badly to be distinguished from . . . self-worship; Bloom does not wish to worship Bloom, that after all not being much of a religious experience. Our contemporary debasement of Gnosticism goes under the name of the New Age, a panoply wide enough to embrace Shirley MacLaine and Mrs. Arianna Huffington, in which Ms. MacLaine worships Ms. MacLaine (with some justification) and Mrs. Huffington reveres Mrs. Huffington (with perhaps less)" (p. 17). A few paragraphs later, Bloom adds: "The New Age, an endlessly entertaining saturnalia of ill-defined yearnings, is less a product of counterculture than it initially seems to be; its origins are in an old mixture of occultism and an American Harmonial faith suspended halfway between feeling good and good feeling. Rock music, the authentic mark or banner of counterculture, is something that once was a new variety of indigenous American religion, however brief or secular, momentarily akin to the outflarings that have engendered permanent beliefs among us: Mormonism, Pentecostalism, Adventism" (p. 18, 19).

5. An emphasis on being "born again" represents a uniquely gnostic understanding of "resurrection. Significantly, the notion of being "born again"--dying and being "born again" while one is still alive--is rooted in John's gospel, chapter 3. We are now able to see thanks to the Nag Hammadi literature, that the discussion in John is significantly influenced by gnosticism, probably the Gnostic Christianity of that time. Early Christian Gnostic writings are filled with discussion of resurrection, its chief idea being that resurrection does not occur after one has died physically. Rather, one "dies" in baptism, and from that one is resurrected, never to die again, as it were. And while the meaning of resurrection is not as well thought out theologically among today's charismatics as it was among the ancient gnostics, the sheer emphasis on being "born again" as a way of experiencing "resurrection" is a clear linkage to Gnostic Christian theology.

The Gnostic document, The Gospel of Philip, is a virtual anthology of teachings about resurrection. At one point, the document puts its understanding of resurrection like this: "Those who say they will die first and then rise are in error. If they do not first receive the resurrection while they live, when they die they will receive nothing. So also when speaking about baptism they say, 'Baptism is a great thing;' because if people receive it they will live."¹⁶

6. A belief in the actual reality of angels and demons characterizes both gnostic philosophy and charismatic Christian doctrine. When good things happen, angels are at work, and when bad things happen, it is because demons are present and working. While these other-worldly creatures are sometimes thought 'of metaphorically, in a gnostic view, they are understood in much more real, even physical, personal terms. Gnostics, for the most part, believe that angels are God's emissaries for good; they "give" good things of all kinds, including money, to those whom they visit. Devils, or demons, are Lucifer's emissaries, going about, in Petrine language, seeking whom they might devour. The language of much charismatic Christian preaching is concerned with "how to overcome the devil." Of late, however, the stronger concern seems to be with the happy side of it all--with the "fixing" and "blessing" work of God's angel's. As summarized by Bloom:

Slowly but massively, an American angelology is developing among us, and not just among the Mormons, and the Pentecostals, and New Age networks, but among Roman Catholics, Southern Baptists, Jews, and across the religious spectrum For us they become images of our freedom: from the past, from authority, from the necessity of dying. And for many of us, I suspect, the angels are well-nigh independent of God. Like the American Jesus, who is primarily the Jesus of the Resurrection, rather than of the Crucifixion or the Ascension, our angels are versions of the Jewish, Christian, Gnostic, and Muslim Angel Christ.¹⁷

16 See The Gospel of Philip in Robinson, ed., The Nag Hammadi Library. p. 153.

17 Bloom. p. 77.

7. A strong dualism between this world and the "other" world is also at the heart of both gnostic doctrine and charismatic Christianity. In both, as well, this world is evil and heaven is the realm of the good, the perfect, the place where God lives and to which the faithful are bound. In fact, in both gnosticism and charismatic Christianity, the sooner we are able to escape from this world, with its cares and woes, and move to that higher, more secure and welcoming place, the better.

The songs of charismatic Christianity are filled with this sentiment. The themes of "I'll Fly Away" and "Gotta Leave this Place" and "When We Get Over There" run through virtually all contemporary Christian music. They are the updated versions, often with starker, more insistent lyrics, of hundred year old evangelical hymns like "In the Sweet By and By" and "When We All Get to Heaven." It is the idea that we are misplaced on this earth since our true home is in heaven. It is this idea, too, that tends to mute any serious concern with working to "fix" this earth, either its ecology or its political-cultural systems. The work, in fact, that should most occupy us is to call, urge, plead for people to come "out of the world" and prepare to leave with us as a community of believers, bound for that "land in the sky."

A very early scholar of contemporary gnosticism was a political philosopher named Eric Voegelin whose books appeared in the 1950s. Voegelin described the "essence of modernity as the growth of gnosticism." At the heart of contemporary gnosticism for Voegelin, however, was "the experience of the world as an alien place," one that confronts us with "a horror of existence and a desire to escape from it."¹⁸ That idea was at the heart of ancient secular and religious gnosticism. It is an idea that has reached a remarkable height in today's charismatic Christianity.

We will stop, however, in order to reflect a bit on the "so what" questions. What am I suggesting by all this?

I am suggesting that, in large part, the secret to the explosive growth of charismatic Christianity today is that inadvertently but powerfully it has tapped into the widespread gnostic ideas and visions that have become ingrained in Western secular culture over the past hundred or more years. Beyond that, I am suggesting that a major reason for the steady decline of mainline Christianity, reflected in virtually every denomination, is that it clings, almost unwittingly, to a philosophical tradition deeply antithetical to those same gnostic tenets that characterize today's dominant culture. To quote Bloom's insightful analysis once again:

We always have been a religiously fecund nation, particularly from the 1800s on. Since our religion tends to be experiential and pragmatic, it increasingly has departed from European Christianity, where the institutional, historical, and theological aspects of the faith have remained

¹⁸ See Smith, in The Nag Hammadi Library, p. 542.

relatively strong.¹⁹

Mainline Christianity is that European Christianity, with its deeply-ingrained institutional, historical and theological aspects still in place, despite the serious eroding of its foundations. It is somewhat ironic from this perspective that the problem with mainline Christianity is precisely its tenacious orthodoxy, its steadfast repudiation still of Gnostic Christian ideas--contrary to those critics who contend that mainstream Christianity has given up its "orthodox" stance. Opposition to gnosticism is in the bloodstream of mainline Protestant and Catholic traditions--and a refusal to give on that opposition, I suggest, is what continues to create the growing gulf between the mainline Christian denominations and the widespread secular gnosticism of this age.²⁰

I want to go a step beyond this, however, to suggest that (again inadvertently) even mainstream Christianity is moving ever so slightly toward gnosticism today; and that, over a long haul, this may be precisely what enables our now-failing denominations to gradually turn things around. Let me cite three signs that can only be seen as encouraging.

First is the halting move toward what is being called "contemporary worship." We still have our orthodox, or traditional, worship. But sometime in an "off hour" we will have a service with some band music, where hand waving and even some Christian dancing may go on, where emotions may be let loose a bit, and where we will even sing those "Wanna Get Outa This World" contemporary song~. We will allow people to "testify," if they wish to, and the' preacher will be less formal, less theological, less stuffy. It will be a "praise" service for the young, or for anyone who would like to experience "being young again." We will imitate the service of the charismatic Christians, and hope that their success with it will rub off on us. It is a good start. It is a stab at a gnostic view of worship, though we should probably not say that aloud to anyone.

The second sign is the new-found concern with "spirituality" among mainstream denominations, and particularly within seminaries and schools of religion. The newest faculty positions on campus after campus are in areas of spirituality, even though no one quite knows what it is or what a new faculty member in the "area" should actually do or teach. Ironically, these positions are even springing up on campuses that have deliberately clung to their "academic" and "professional" programs, viewing too much

¹⁹ Bloom, p. 76

²⁰ This age being now the "postmodern" one. Richard Smith, in his essay on the relevance of gnostic thought today, concludes by noting that the coming of postmodernism is like a new plateau for gnosticism. He refers to Ihab Hassan's well-known 1987 book, The Postmodern Turn, which includes a discussion of what Hassan calls the "New Gnosticism." Then Smith comments, "Contemporary philosophy and literary criticism are on 'a gnostic journey into subjectivity, that leaves texts behind and vanishes into consciousness.' Our own mental constructs. [Hassan] claims, are our knowledge. Human beings are becoming 'gnostic creatures constituting themselves, determining their universe by symbols of their own making'" (in Robinson, p. 548).

concern with spirituality as somehow demeaning. The "new spirituality" of mainstream seminary education, however, is a clear indication of the push toward gnostic forms of Christian experience and "knowing."

A third sign, too, is worth noting. It is seen in a new strain of theology which seems to be taking hold--a "colony" theology based on the idea that Christians are "aliens" on the earth, people who do not belong here, who join together as members of a Christian "colony," but whose real home is not here at all, but in heaven. It is an old idea, based in a New Testament line or two, but it is being worked out with anew, and very inviting, sophistication.²¹ It is also a striking gnostic idea ..

The point is that mainstream Christian thinking about these things needs to become more deliberate and systematic--done with our eyes open. The question we face is an old one: Can we be Gnostic and Christian at the same time? The charismatic movements have answered it--yes they can and yes they will be--and the attractiveness of that in these contemporary gnostic times is amazingly strong. But what of gnostic inclinations, ideas and practices can mainline Christianity embrace and embody and still be mainline Christianity? Whether we realize it or not, we are trying to figure that out. It is a worthwhile undertaking; one on which, as far as I can tell, may hang the future of the old European styles of Christianity.

²¹ See, among other sources, Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, Resident Aliens (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).