
In looking over my past activities in the area of early Christianity I found a letter I sent to Harold Bloom in 1996 telling of something I was reminded of in the books I had just read by him, this one and the one that follows in this list. What was I enthused about? I really liked several statement on his chapters on Mormonism, meaning Joseph Smith’s original version of Mormonism that according to Bloom lasted for about 60 years. The current religion, he says, is a compromise with modernity, even if it is not a betrayal of the original.

So, what did he say that I liked then, but that also has meaning in the context of the present discussion ignited by my reading of Freke and Gandy? Plenty.

For example, there is this gem on page 81, following an explanation that the "American Religion" has two crucial branches, the Mormons and the Southern Baptists:

To myself, culturally an American Jewish intellectual but not an adherent of normative Judaism, nothing about our country seems to marvelously strange, so terrible and so wonderful, as its weird identification with ancient Israelite religion and with the primitive Christian Church that supposedly came out of it. The largest paradox concerning the American Religion is that it is truly a Biblical religion, whereas Judaism and Christianity never were that, despite all their passionate protestations. Normative Judaism is the religion of the Oral Law, the strong interpretation of the Bible set forth by the great rabbis of the second century of the Common Era. Christianity is the religion of the Church Fathers and of the Protestant theologians who broke with the Church,
and Catholics and Protestants alike joined the rabbinical sages in offering definitive interpretations that displaced Scripture. The American Religion, unlike Judaism and Christianity, is actually biblical, even when it offers and exalts alternative texts as well.

I also found this statement thought-provoking on page 83, it is about Saint Paul, . . ."(whose theology is almost totally cast out by the Mormons)," . . . . If we are looking for a restoration of pre-Pauline, primitive Christianity, this would have to be a necessity, even though Bloom’s statement is close to being an overstatement.

On page 84 there is another gem:

Mormonism is a wonderfully strong misprision, or creative misreading, of the early history of the Jews. So strong was this act of reading that it broke through all the orthodoxies–Protestant, Catholic, Judaic–and found its way back to elements that Smith rightly intuited had been censored out of the stories of the archaic Judaic religion. Smith’s radical sense of theomorphic patriarchs and anthropomorphic gods is an authentic return to J, or the Yahwist, the Bible’s first author.

Bloom goes on and on with interesting observations, but in the present context catches my eye again at pages 98-99 where he alludes to the uncanny apparent familiarity of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young with the Kabbalah and Gnosticism:

Researchers have not yet established, to my satisfaction, precisely how much the Prophet Joseph knew about Jewish esoteric tradition or Kabbalah, or about the Christian Gnostic heresies. One wants to know also just what Brigham Young had absorbed from
these sources, since some of Young’s speculations about God and Adam, and on the ascent of the soul after death, are strikingly akin to ancient suggestions.

This theme is continued with a discussion of the ancient Jewish fascination with Enoch which is recreated by Joseph Smith, who identified himself with Enoch. Enoch became Metatron, an angel of cosmic proportions related with Adam and with God, and this was a focus of some of Brigham’s Young’s more interesting theological speculations. This discussion ends up with a discussion of Joseph’s revelation regarding Enoch on page 100 where Bloom observes:

It is a crucial commonplace of Mormonism that Joseph Smith nullified the distinction between Old Testament and New testament, and cast out all of church history that intervened between the biblical texts and himself.

No wonder that, while a true believer, I was so excited by Daniélou’s description of Jewish Christianity which is exactly where Bloom describes Joseph Smith to have been. My letter to Bloom was to note to him that my readings had presented me with another sect that this description could be applied to, the Radical Anabaptists and their prophets and restoration rhetoric who temporarily took over the city of Muenster, Germany, and set up the Kingdom of God anew, in the image of Old testament society with a curious mix of Old and New Testament theology.

Of course Bloom says there is no such thing as a theology in the Old testament, there is the Yahwist’s anthropomorphic God and theopomorhic man that are just like Joseph’s Smith’s vision of a God who is an exalted man. This is where Bloom ventures next, and he even includes polygamy as an integral part of this mix, as a natural outcome of the
cosmology and theology of Joseph, with plenty of idiosyncratic Kabbalistic commonalities where the holiness and creative powers of human sexuality are concerned.

Page 110 links the theomorphic man of Joseph Smith to the indwelling God of the Christian mystics, the Jewish Kabbalists, and the Islamic Sufis. In fact it was Brigham Young who reported that Joseph had taught him that God was in us, and Godhead resided in every portion of our beings. The connection of the Mormon God, described as limited because of his being a physical man that has achieved exaltation, with the Demiurge of Plato and the Gnostics, is applauded by Bloom. The connection was made by a Mormon theologian, Sterling McMurrin, who is quoted on page 115. On page 117 he again mentions the astonishing fact that somehow Brigham Young

...had found his way back to ancient Gnostic or Kabbalistic identifications in which Yahweh, Michael (or Metatron, Enoch), and Adam were three names for one being.

An Essene and Gnostic connection is indicated by Bloom on pages 118 through 119 regarding the Mormon insistence on adult baptism and baptism for the dead. Bloom suggests Paul in I Corinthians 15:29 neither approves nor disapproves of the practice. He simply uses it to make a point. Daniélou (see item # 13), on the other hand, says Paul disapproved of the practice but used it to make a point anyway.

The sympathetic scholar of contemporary religion Jan Shipps is cited on page 123 as indicating that the doctrine of eternal progression toward Godhood is a form of gnosis. The idea that one must know Jesus to be saved is not the correct model for this gnosis, it is rather the becoming Christ through one’s own effort and the church’s structure and
teachings. Jesus is rather unnecessary in this salvation scheme, according to Bloom, making Mormonism "no more a kind of Christianity than Islam is. Instead, Mormonism is a pure American Gnosis, for which Joseph Smith was and is a far more crucial figure than Jesus would be." Bloom goes on, but you get the drift.

Bloom then launches into the Mormon speculations on the co-eternal nature of the human spirit with God, and the idea that such spirits are housed into mortal bodies, temporarily through the act of birth. The kabbalah is again called in as a parallel development, and Joseph Smith's Mormonism is again called the American Gnosticism on page 126. But you get the point: Mormonism, in its original dress, looked much like some Christian Gnostics and ancient Jewish esotericists looked.

[See the item on Jenkins (last few paragraphs of item # 22) for a note on the notion of a "post-Christian nation." A book by Jenkins which I give a reference to there suggests that as the nation goes, the world is not be going. Christianity is alive and growing in the third world, and it is of the literalist, if not exactly fundamentalist, variety.]