

5. Bloom, Harold, *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams and Resurrection* (Riverhead Books 1996)

What does this book have to do with the subject at hand, early Christianity? It sets some precedents. For example he argues on pages 6 through 9 he argues for a borrowing from Zoroastrianism to explain the angelology and other otherworldly aspects of the Jewish religion, as reflected in the books of Daniel and the apocryphal Book of Enoch.

On page 7 he cites a scholar who sees the influence of Zurvanism, the evolved version of Zoroastrianism that became bigger and lasted longer, on the theology and cosmology of the Qumran Essenes, of Dead Sea Scrolls fame. From there it found its way into the Gospel of John.

Does that make the Essenes Zurvanites, or the Johannine Christians? No. And just as there are convincing traces of Gnosticism in John's (or Paul's) works, that also doesn't say they were Gnostics. That is the lesson I take away from these pages, whether that lesson was meant to be there or not.

On pages 10 and 11 Bloom makes another good point: If you define Gnosis as he does, as "direct acquaintance of God within the self," then you find it in Zoroastrianism, Hermetism, Christian Gnosticism, Muslim Sufism, and Jewish Kabbalism. You also find it, sometimes in adulterated form, in the New Age movement. Bloom doesn't care for the Jungian idea of a 'collective unconscious' to explain these types of recurring archetypal images. But he does wonder whether they "copy one another or turn within to copy something that is already within themselves, the best and oldest elements of their selves?"

That is a great question. I have asked and answered it for myself. I like Jung's ideas and outlook on this type of phenomenon, and I see no difference between Bloom's suggestion of a common archetype in the human makeup and Jung's view of the same thing.

I am perplexed on pages 22 and 23 where Bloom argues that C.S. Lewis illustrates the very antithesis of Gnosticism where he calls for a complete mindless submission to God, giving up all that you are, as an act of faith in his book *Mere Christianity*. Bloom says that is the opposite of Gnosis, knowing the God within. This really surprises me. Several Christian mystics I have read, as well as Rumi, of whom I write elsewhere, are perfect examples of persons who have completely surrendered their selves to God, and by doing so discovered God in them. Their surrender led to their ecstatic experience of God, which gave them Gnosis.

But on page 23 there is a statement I vehemently disagree with followed by a statement I completely agree with because I had been thinking it before reading it here:

*Islam* means "submission" to the will of Allah, as expressed through his messenger Muhammad, "the seal of the prophets." But Gnosis is not a believing that, a trusting in, or a submission. Rather it is a mutual knowing, and a simultaneous being known, of and by God.

I cannot pretend that this is a simple process; it is far more elitist than C.S. Lewis's "mere Christianity," and I suspect this elitism is why Gnosticism always has been defeated by orthodox Christian faith, in history.

I am under the same impression but for a different reason: but I also see the Gnostic writings as signs of elitism, always pointing out that they know something that by implication no

one else knows. That elitism made them a religion for the few, by definition. In my opinion.

Bloom's whole book is, of course, trying to make a point I am avoiding, which is the resurgence of Gnosticism in our time. So I keep picking up things he says are not the main purpose of the book, his historical allusions that are meant as asides. On page 53 I found one of those historical asides that was quite insightful I thought:

The anarchistic Brethren of the Free Spirit in the fifteenth century, like the Provençal Cathars of the twelfth, join the Manicheans as the three large instances of Gnostic movements that transcended an esoteric religion of the intellectuals. Ancient Gnosticism, like Romantic and modern varieties, was a religion of the elite only, almost a literary religion. A purified Gnosticism, then as now, is truly for a relative handful only, and perhaps is as much an aesthetic as it is a spiritual discipline.

Have thought this but never was able to put it into words. The Cathars of whom I write elsewhere on this site was a populist religion because of its emphasis on creating a cooperative society in the midst of feudalism. Its appeal was not to the intellect of the peasants and nobles that sought refuge in its social structure in which noble and peasant worked for each other's mutual benefit.

Pages 46 and 47 were of interest to me since they mentioned the troubled times that led to apocalyptic books like the book 1 Enoch and also to the birth of Christianity. Pages 78 through 81 were of interest since here he makes note of the similarity between the angelology, and the emphasis on Enoch, in these troubled times that birthed Christianity and Mormonism's angelology and emphasis on

Enoch. What does this have to do with the birth of Christianity? The suggestion clearly is that the phenomenon of a new religion rising out of troubled times was repeated in the 1830's. And just as I believe that some of the unquestioned assumptions of Victorian society, such as the absolute truth that men and women belong in separate spheres, made it into the revelations of Joseph Smith and thus got turned into truths about heaven: separate spheres forever!

Bloom finally gets to making the points I remembered from my first reading about early Christianity on page 160 through 162. He contrasts the Gnostic Christ with the Pauline Christ and asks why scholars favor the latter when it is clearly not the Christ of the earlier tradition. He rightly does not claim that Gnosticism is that earlier tradition, but suggests it lies with the Christians under the leadership of James at Jerusalem. Ebionites, according to Bloom, were the legacy of James the Just. Islam, according to Bloom, was a return to Ebionitism, in part: in neither religion was Jesus the god-man Paul describes. Virgin birth is decried as a silly story in both religions. And of course the Islamic role of the angel Gabriel is contrasted with the Ebionite reverence for Adam, who became a chief angel, as in Mormonism. On page 161 Bloom made another reference to the Cathars as also not believing in a virgin birth, like good Gnostics.

The next five pages are taken up with observations on the resurrection, which to the unorthodox means something allegorical, and to the orthodox means something very physical. Resurrection is something rather imaginal, an existence in the "intermediate realm between pure matter and pure spirit." This, according to Bloom, is the belief of Gnosis through the ages. I cite these items because several of the other books I am reading in this list focus on the importance of the nature of the belief in the resurrection in

deciding what camp an early Christian document or thought belongs in.

On page 167 Bloom cites *The Gospel of Thomas*:

Jesus said: "I am not your teacher. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended.

Bloom says as a comment on this:

Intoxication is rather different from obedience; you can be obedient either in the physical or the spiritual world, but not in the extended interval of resurrection, which is an imaginal world in the rather rigorous sense derived by Henry Corbin from his Sufi precursors.

Sorry, Harold, but you are off base. The very fact that you mention Sufis and intoxication tells me this intoxication has nothing whatever to do with disobedience. Sufis use drunkenness as an allegory for the ecstatic state that comes from knowing God in you, and you in God. Jesus is using it the same way here. Neither Sufis nor Jesus are known for advocating disobedience to God, as far as I know.

Chapter 4 of Bloom's book gives a very nice and sympathetic overview of Gnosticism in history, I marked almost every page as having something meaningful on it. Chapters 5 and 6 also have a few pages marked as having good stuff I liked. Chapter 5 is on the importance of the Millennium in our present culture's Gnosticism, and Chapter 6 is a sermon on the type of Gnosticism that Bloom believes in. I will cut back severely the number of items I originally intended to mention here because they were either pertinent to the subject of understanding early Christianity or just plain interesting.

Pages 176 through 181 describe Hermetism, a pagan-Greek Gnosticism from the first century. Its doctrines were classic Gnostic notions attractively packaged. I did not know until reading this book that Giordano Bruno was a Hermetist, who was executed for heresy in the sixteenth century, was a believer in replacing Christ with Hermes, the author of the *Hermetica*. I am in the process of reading a new Biography on Bruno to check this out. (Finished it, and Bloom makes a ridiculous caricature of Bruno by describing his beliefs in this way. Replacing Christ with Hermes was not at all what he was about. See my notes on a book by White, item # 38).

Bloom ends his observations on Hermetism by noting that Hellenistic Judaism influenced it, and it is milder and less agitated than its slightly later replacements, Christian and Jewish Gnosticism. During the Renaissance there was a Hermetic revival, punctuated with Bruno's death as noted. He also observes that modern religiosity in the U.S. is very Hermetic in terms of its self-reliance notions, and even in terms of the way that the born-again life is characterized by some.

Hermetists wrote about the Primal Man, the Adam-God, who fell from light into this sphere and became us. As we come to know God we are restored to knowing our true selves. All of this of course reminds me (and Bloom, as we saw in his "American Religion" book, of the early Mormons, in this case Brigham Young who would have been in complete harmony with Hermes. Young, as I well recall from my Mormon years, taught that Adam was our God, and when he was challenged on that statement he said it did not matter whether we considered Adam our God, or his Father (which is what Mormons currently believe) or his Grandfather, etc.

B.H. Roberts, another Mormon cited by Bloom in his other book, in one of the last discourse of his life simply called

“God,” explained that there is “One God, Made of Many.” There is no jealousy among the personages who are the gods that make up the One God, hence Brigham Young’s statement that which particular God we worship does not matter.

Young’s unacceptable statement has faded into history, with some modern Mormon leaders asserting he never said it. That is malarkey of course. Another more modern Mormon leader put it into a time-dependent context saying that what Young meant was that Adam had over time achieved his Godhood, and would at the end of time be placed at the head of the human race. If this is what Young’s remark on Adam being our God meant he would have said so, of course. What he did say is strikingly in harmony with Hermes’ concept, as portrayed by Bloom, of God falling into this domain and becoming us.

In that light, it was very significant thing to me in my Mormon days to contemplate the less controversial but yet strangely related idea from Brigham Young that if we could see ourselves, right now, as we really are, we would fall on our knees and worship ourselves! He also said he was sometimes intimidated to see God in us, his fellow believers, as he faced them from a podium. Godhead resided in every particle of us, he claimed. These statements were a great source of wonder to me. Still are. Now I see they are quite in line with Hermetism.

According to Bloom, the gentle acceptance of this present human reality sits in great contrast to the stridence of the later Gnostics. It was Sufi masters, according to Bloom, who restored the concept of the Man of Light, the man reborn into his nascent godhood by union with the spirit, which Hermes wrote about two-thousand years ago. As we will see in a minute, it is this type of rebirth that Christian Gnostics

saw as the resurrection. Something to be achieved in the here and now. American religious sensibility seems to be on this same wavelength now, says Bloom. Brigham Young was ahead of his time, even though several millennia behind Hermes, and even though he was a literalist where resurrection was concerned. Else what to do with all those eternal wives?

Bloom next launches with great enthusiasm into a summary of the teaching of Valentinus. Pages 181 through 194 cover this Christian Gnostic's teachings, with emphasis on his notions about resurrection.

In the previous part on Hermetism Bloom alluded to the movement of ideas between it and Hellenistic Judaism. In this part Bloom suggests that Gnosis developed in Judaism and from there spread into Christianity and eventually Islam (p. 182). The fact that Hermetism is not considered Gnosticism, but a philosophy stating ideas that become key in later Gnosticism. So these ideas are reconcilable. What is harder to reconcile is on page 185, however, where he disagrees with the renowned master scholar on Gnosticism, Hans Jonas, who makes almost exactly the same statement Bloom made on page 182 about Gnosticism coming from Judaism into Christianity. In the context of the elusiveness of the roots of Gnosticism Bloom writes (pp. 184-185):

Hunting for true selfhood can be fool's gold; reality recedes as rapidly as we grasp after it. Searching for the historical origins of Gnosticism is rather like that; the closer the scholar approaches, the more elusive the phenomenon seems to become. "Gnosticism" as a term did not exist before the seventeenth century, but we are unable to avoid using it when we ponder its original tendency, or religion, or heresy, or whatever we choose to call it. Despite its rebellion against normative

Judaism, or paradoxically because of it, Gnosticism was probably Jewish in origin. With great respect for the late Hans Jonas, whose writings on Gnosticism have influenced me deeply, I go against him on this question. Gnostic Christianity, I suspect, began with Jesus himself, and with the Jewish Christians led by his brother James, after the death of Jesus. If Jesus essentially was a Gnostic, how did he come by this stance? What is it that makes the Gnostic Jesus of *The Gospel of Thomas* so persuasive?

As I was reading these words I was already wondering if perhaps Bloom sees *The Gospel of Thomas* as a genuine collection of Jesus' sayings with no later embellishment. Apparently the answer is yes. Paradoxically, however, on page 187 he observes that . . . "the experience of reading the technically non-Gnostic *gospel of Thomas* is wholly other than that of reading the four Gospels that are canonical."

Bloom, by using these words, the "technically non-Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*," is making a good point to keep in mind again and again. That point is that labeling things "Gnostic" is applying a modern set of definitions totally unknown at the time these materials were being written. In other words, the speakers and writers saying the things we now call Gnostic were not aware that they were any such thing.

Bloom next takes several pages to provide a foundation for his rather radical and surprising statement that Jesus was a Gnostic in effect (there was no recognized philosophy called Gnosticism until the 1500's, as noted above).

His first proof is the existence of Jewish traditions regarding the exaltation of Adam as "the True Prophet or *Christos*, the Angel Christ." My interpretation of Bloom here is that this is the necessary precursor to Gnosis because it provided the

example deification of a human, an example we are all meant to follow. He next discusses Alexandria as the place where, in the second century, Christian and Judaic Gnosticism Judaism developed leaving the documents we have today, but he warns that this was not the place where Jewish Gnosis was born: Palestine.

Moving through pages 186 and 187 Bloom discusses the rebellion against normative Judaism that became Gnostic Judaism, largely among Hellenized Jews. Apocalyptic writings are the evidence of this trend, with the Book of Daniel and the Books of Enoch created out of this ferment. Much later the Kabbalah was inspired by this Jewish Gnostic development. All of these things we already heard, so we will move on to Valentinus who is being discussed in this section.

Valentinus is a Gnostic, but as we keep noting: he didn't know that. He lives in Alexandria, and lived from 100 to 175 A.D. He is characterized by the expert Bentley Layton, as interpreted by Bloom, as a Gnostic Christian rather than a Christian Gnostic. He "was a Christian reformer of earlier Gnostic theology." (p. 187)

Valentinus produced brilliant poetry and literature, and Bloom cites examples. One of my favorite ancient Gnostic works is *The Gospel of Phillip* which Bloom says is Valentinian. I didn't know that.

Bloom spends much book space making the point that the sharpest difference between Valentinus and normative Christianity as we know it lies in the doctrine of the resurrection. Valentinus, in Bloom's words, believes resurrection is a rebirth, in effect, that comes with baptism (pp. 188-189):

That is the kernel of the Valentinian resurrection: to *know* releases the spark, and one rises up from the body of this death. Ignorance falls away, one ceases to forget, one is again part of the Fulness. . . .

Bloom supports these points with appropriate citations, and then observes that (p. 189):

Only the spark is resurrected, through the liberation of Valentinus's version of baptism. Valentinus' followers created literature for over 500 years, but just a few fragments remain from the master himself. Bloom has fun citing some materials from the main sermon left from Valentinus and the only poem surviving that he wrote himself. Then he closes out the section by making a note that gets us back to the reason I was reading this book: the peculiarities of the history of the Gnostic/Christian competition, then war, by Freke and Gandy. On pages 194 and 195 he says:

Valentinus, a great elitist, offered an intellectual salvation and resurrection to intellectuals, and a modified hope to those of lesser gifts. Doubtless, the ultimate defeat of Valentinianism by the Church, a defeat that prevails until this day, owed much to this spiritual elitism, which baffled ordinary Christians who could not believe that they were already resurrected.

I think that is a nice but subtle corrective to the Freke and Gandy version of history. However, I will also cite the book by Rubenstein (item # 32) that shows there was indeed bloody war by the Christians against the Valentinians, but much later in history than the history covered by Freke and Gandy.

Bloom's next section has nothing to do with the subject at

hand, but is all about the Muslim's Sufis, mystics with Gnostic elements and tendencies, and about the Jewish Kabbalists, mystics with Gnostic elements and tendencies. He essentially provides documentation for some of the claims he made about these two groups in earlier sections of the book. But though it is all interesting, it is way off-subject for this focused review. Focused? On some days yes, other days no, and I have been at this for months already!

His whole fifth chapter now takes these ancient ideas and finds them again alive and well in modern American religiosity. I was pleased with his observation that the primary vehicle for bringing some of these old Gnostic ideas into modern times was early Mormonism during its wild, speculative, formative years.

Bloom's book ends with a delightful read that is basically his testimony to his own Gnostic beliefs. I found myself in accord with much of what he said. Not with some of what he said. But let's not go there, describing my fuzzy reservations about what he had to say is as tedious to write as it is to read, not germane to the topic at hand, and besides, I greatly enjoyed this whole book including its last section.