

Above All Earthly Pow'rs

Christ in a Postmodern World



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CHAPTER IV

Christ in a Spiritual World



He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

ECCLESIASTES 3:11

It is the “invisible religion”¹ which is the subject of this chapter, the emergence of a new kind of spiritual person: one who is on a spiritual quest but often pursuing this in opposition to what is religious.

1. The language of invisible religions is that of Thomas Luckmann. Over thirty years ago, he saw a new “sacred cosmos” in the making, itself the consequence of the way that modernized society was evolving. At the center of this cosmos was the autonomous individual, what Bellah would later call the “unencumbered self,” one which was obliged only to itself. This autonomy, Luckmann argued, was assuming a kind of sacred status. Increasingly, for a variety of reasons, what was ultimate was becoming relocated in the self, in what was private and internal. But here he noticed an interesting ambiguity. It is that the self which is at the center of this new spirituality is itself murky and elusive. Without its discovery, therefore, there will be no spirituality for this new sacred cosmos which does not reflect the self’s own murkiness and elusiveness. Since “the ‘inner man’ is, in effect, an undefinable entity, its presumed discovery involves a lifelong quest,” he said. What that means is that the “individual who is to find a source of ‘ultimate’ significance in the subjective dimension of biog-

That, however, may be stating the matter a little too starkly for it suggests that religions are being understood in terms of what they actually assert. In reality, religions tend to blur in the postmodern mind and become undifferentiated from each other. That is the almost inevitable outcome of our pluralism. When religions become aware of each other in the postmodern world, they typically either lose their sharp edges or are at least seen as having done so. It is as predictable as it is desultory that 44% of Americans think that "the Bible, the Koran and the Book of Mormon are different expressions of the same spiritual truths."² Yet it remains the case that this spirituality sees itself as other than what is religious, be this religion which is insistently doctrinal or religion which has become blurred by its passage through the postmodern spirit.

It is this emergent spirituality which is in focus in this chapter, although I do not want in any way to minimize the religious issues which are at stake.³ It is this spirituality that threatens to rumble through evangelical faith in a way more detrimental to it than any Christian engagement with non-Christian religions. In this chapter, then, I need to accomplish three things: first, I need to provide some description of this new spiritual search; second, I will explore the parallels that exist between this new quest and what the Church has faced before, espe-

raphy embarks upon a process of self-realization and self-expression. . . ." Self-realization and self-expression are the principal forms of autonomy in "the modern sacred cosmos." Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Transformation of Symbols in Industrial Society* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1967), 110.

2. George Barna, "Americans Draw Theological Beliefs from Diverse Points of View," October 8, 2002. Available online at <http://www.barna.org>.

3. The religious issue, of course, is whether biblical truth claims are privileged, whether Christians should think of the gospel of Christ as being uniquely true and, if so, what should be said about truth and salvation in the other religions. Alongside the traditional exclusivist view in the evangelical world has emerged one that is inclusivist. This has been articulated in somewhat different ways but the difficulty of even the more modest proposals is well illustrated in Stanley Grenz's discussion in his *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 249-86. More recently, Amos Young also reviews this discussion in his *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 105-28. He has then struck out in a different direction proposing that it is possible to "discern" the work of the Spirit in the other religions; this succeeds in decoupling the work of the Spirit from the person of Christ, which is not a happy outcome.

cially in the patristic period; and, third, I need to outline what a biblical response to this search looks like.

The New Spiritual Yearning

These new spiritualities are now taking their place alongside some older ones, spiritualities which often define themselves over against religion but nevertheless are not averse to incorporating religious ideas. The reappearance of a spiritual dimension, in one sense, is the reappearance of what was once commonplace. Outside the modernized West, it is hard to find peoples or cultures in which there has not been some sense of another world, some sense of the presence of the sacred in life, and therefore of the obligation to offer worship. Human history is replete with images, rituals, and rites related to this Other and with human striving, searching, and hoping about this spiritual reality. Yet it is also true that this spiritual questing in the past usually expressed itself through religion whereas today its relationship to the religions is more complex, distant, and nuanced. The Enlightenment, in its hard rationalism, cast cold water on all of this and imagined that in the triumph of reason all such superstition would, in time, wither and blow away. That, of course, has not happened and we, today, are seeing this massive return of spiritualities which would have been inconceivable only a few decades ago.

Individuals and groups who have thus turned to things spiritual have, since the 1960s, had assorted goals, some of which also overlap. For some, the aim has been that of finding peace of mind or inner transformation; in its Eastern configuration, the goal has been achieving a different kind of consciousness; in its shallowest and most banal form, it is about self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-actualization, achievements which may come in a purely secular form or as a part of spiritual self-discovery; and for contemporary gnostics, the hope is empowerment — not in the ways we encounter in gender politics, which are frequently fueled by resentment, but in the sense of connecting with a power deep within the self.

In Europe and America, a substantial number of people see themselves as spiritual in these different ways, and many oppose this spiri-

tuality to what is religious. As we have seen, in America 78% see themselves as spiritual and 56% say that in addressing life's crises, they are inclined to look within themselves rather than to depend upon an outside power such as the Christian God. That, in a way, is no surprise since 54% also think that the only truth that anyone can find will be found through reason and experience rather than in an external source such as the Bible.⁴

When the Enlightenment mindset dominated American culture, those who said that they looked within themselves for answers were, in all likelihood, secularists and humanists of one kind or another. In the postmodern moment in which we are living, however, those who look within themselves are not necessarily divorcing themselves from the sacred. On the contrary, many are actually believers in the sacred which they are pursuing within themselves. They are not seeking the God of the Christian religion, who is transcendent, who speaks to life from outside of it, whose Son came from "above," as the Apostle John repeatedly tells us,⁵ and entered it through the Incarnation, whose Word is absolute and enduring, and whose moral character defines the difference between Good and Evil forever. Rather, it is the god within, the god who is found within the self and in whom the self is rooted. This is, for the most part, a simple perception and as found spread throughout American society it comes with few pretensions to having great intellectual depth. Yet that is not always the case. Mircea Eliade, for example, has spoken of the "irruption of the sacred"⁶ within life and of the complex ways in which myths and dreams are rooted in the manifestations of the divine within. It is the same belief, then, which comes sometimes in homely ways and sometimes wrapped in complexity —

4. Barna, "Americans Draw Theological Beliefs from Diverse Points of View."

5. The structure of Johannine christology is built around two contrasts, the glory/flesh paradox and the above/below contrast. On the latter, John tells us that Christ came from above (Jn. 6:33) from whence he left the presence of God (Jn. 6:62; 8:38; 10:36). It was from the realm above that he descended (Jn. 3:13; 6:33, 38; 10:36) and from this realm that he was "sent" by the Father. This language of sending is used forty-two times in the gospel (examples being 3:17; 9:39; 10:36; 12:45; 16:28; and 18:37); it provides the basis for saying that John's christology is one of mission.

6. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper, 1960), 15.

and yet this inward presence invariably proves to be elusive and so the search is always unfinished. In this searching, it is hoped, there will be found the balm of therapeutic comfort, the suggestion of meaning and of connectedness to something larger.

This search is almost impossible to describe with accuracy because it is as varied as are the searchers. Those who have written about it, therefore, have mostly been drawn to the writers who have made explicit what they are thinking. This, of course, is entirely understandable. It is not hard to see, however, that those who have articulated the nature of this new spirituality represent only a part of it, what we might think of as an inner circle, and around them, either near or far, are many others who may share the same assumptions, may be in the same firmament of ideas, but who lack the clarity and the radical nature of the inner circle.⁷

Some of the beliefs of the new spirituality have found reinforcement among the teachers and adherents of Eastern spirituality who have flooded into America in the new waves of immigration or on the airwaves. They have acquired followers. Courses in Eastern spirituality, as well as in the literature of these religions, are showing up on college campuses and on television in much greater profusion than was the case even a decade ago. However, as Richard Kyle points out, there are ways in which Americans are "turning east" which are vaguer and more difficult to specify than what we see in overt disciples of the East, and this is what we are seeing in this new search. Some Americans practice meditation without being fully aware of its religious underpinnings. Others practice the martial arts without being aware of the Buddhist philosophy that underlies them. It is in these and other ways that some in this new spiritual quest are filling out their stock of ideas and practices from Eastern influences but doing so in ways that make clear categorical distinctions difficult.⁸

As we move away from its center in the radicals, the assumptions of this spirituality become ever hazier, the conclusions lose their sharp-

7. Peter Jones describes this inner circle, which he designates the New Religious Left, in his *Spirit Wars: Pagan Revival in Christian America* (Mukilteo, Wash.: Wine Press Publishing, 1998).

8. Richard Kyle, *The Religious Fringe: A History of Alternative Religions in America* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 197-202.

ness, the practice becomes more privatized. Away from this center, we find many of the 56% among Americans who say that in life's crises they look within themselves for answers rather than to an outside power like God (as he has been traditionally understood) but who do not necessarily tie this disposition into some expression of formalized spirituality. They may not be radical feminists, may eschew Eastern gurus, may not adhere to New Age, may not meditate, may be quite uninterested in crystals and channelers, may have no use for mantras, may want to keep their distance from witches and the occult, and yet in ways that are loose, often ill-defined, and unformulated, they are nevertheless still part of this new search for what is spiritual. They are in search of a new *consciousness*. If they speak of transformation, as so many do, it is in terms of their own human potential, the innate sources of personal renewal which lie deep within. If they speak of their own intuitions, as they often do, it is with the sense of having onboard a navigational system which enables them to find their place in reality. Or, perhaps more correctly, it allows them to find a better place in reality. And if they speak of a connectedness for which they yearn, it is in the blurry sense that somehow the human and divine are no longer disengaged from each other but, rather, are implicated in each other.⁹

An outside God, such as we find in biblical faith, is comprehensible because he is self-defined in his revelation; the inside god is not. The inside god is merged into the psychological texture of the seeker and found spread within the vagaries of the self. The outside God stands over against those who would know him; the inside one emerges within their consciousness and is a part of them. Religions have their schools of thought and their interpreters, and always the debate is over who most truly understands the religion. Spirituality, in the

9. When encounters with the supernatural have been reported, as they frequently have been in recent decades, there has been no terror and no awe in the reporting. Encounters and bright lights have fascinated postmodern seekers because they offered reassurance that there was something to life beyond the harsh, competitive, secular world, and these encounters made those who reported them feel good. In a perceptive comment, Wuthnow observes that the "emphasis on self-gratification in the culture at large is also evident in the ways the miraculous experiences are interpreted. They cater to the interests of persons reporting them, and they provide spiritual comfort without making demands on people's time or commitments." *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 130.

contemporary sense, spawns no such debate because it makes no truth claims and seeks no universal significance. It lives out its life within the confines of private experience. "Truth" is private, not public; it is for the individual, not for the universe. Here is American individualism coupled with some new assumptions about God which are being glossed off with infatuations about pop therapy, uniting to produce varieties of spirituality as numerous as those who think of themselves as spiritual.

What is held in common across this broad spectrum of spiritual yearning is the desire to find the Real in the midst of the mundane, to look beyond or beneath the surface of modernized life with its hard-driving commerce, its fatuous slogans, its glossy images, crowded thoroughfares, and relentless pressures, and find a connection to something more meaningful. But beyond this, a thick fog descends on what this spirituality actually entails. Is the Real that is sought wholly immanent within the subject or does it also lie outside the subject? Is what is Real actually experienced or is the search for what is Real the means by which some semblance of meaning is found? And what may be expected to result from this spiritual search? Is it a moment of luminous insight? An experience? Is it a sense of tranquillity? Is it liberation from the oppressive experience of human individuality? Is it a psychological liberation from the rasping, grating experience of living in a modernized world? Or is it just a quiet sense that one actually is connected to a larger reality? And how far out of time does this spirituality lead? Into eternity or simply into other pockets of reality that are often obscured by the frenetic activity that happens in a world that is modernized? Or is this spirituality simply a psychological coping mechanism, a technique, for the stresses and strains of modernized life? It is probably the case that all of these options can be found within the contemporary world of spirituality. Without a common worldview and rituals, and with few commonly articulated beliefs, this cultural phenomenon spills out in all directions.

It is helpful, however, to recall the distinction Wuthnow makes between a spirituality of dwelling and one of journeying. The former is what describes traditional Christian spirituality,¹⁰ one that flourishes

10. As noted earlier, Wuthnow's use of this image was applied to the Christianity of the 1950s in America, and in his mind this image of a house is reflective of the rather conventional, sanitized culture of that time. In using this image, I am not thinking of its use in cultural terms but, rather, in those that are doctrinal.

within doctrinal parameters. It demands that the self live within those parameters. And what anchors this self, amidst the pains, perplexities and changes of life, is the knowledge of the God who does not change. His saving purposes were fixed in eternity and were expressed in Christ in whom "all the promises of God find their Yes" (II Cor. 1:20). In this understanding, God, on account of his holiness and perfection, imposes upon humans standards of belief and behavior. Critics down the centuries have insisted that this means that humans must divest themselves of their freedoms, their independence of thought, or risk defying God. They either make their own decisions or they have to slavishly submit to decisions they themselves have not made. This is the "slave religion" that Nietzsche mocked and rejected. And it is what is rejected in the new spiritual quest.

A spirituality of journey in this contemporary sense, by contrast, does not begin with what has been given by God, or with what does not change. Rather, it begins with the self. It begins in the soil of human autonomy and it gives to the self the authority to decide what to believe, from what sources to draw knowledge and inspiration, and how to test the viability of what is believed. The result is that this kind of spirituality is inevitably experimental and even libertarian. Its validation comes through the psychological or therapeutic benefits which are derived. Mixing and matching, discarding or reappropriating ideas in an endless process of searching and experimenting, is what this spirituality is about.

There is, however, an additional refinement that needs to be placed on this image suggested by Wuthnow. A journey it may be, but in many cases the one taking this very modern journey should actually be thought of as being more of a tourist than a purposeful traveler. That is the telling observation Zygmunt Bauman has made.¹¹ It is really this metaphor of the tourist that best describes this new spiritual search. Tourists are not rooted in the places they visit. They are just passing through, just looking. They are there only for their pleasure and entertainment. They are unrelated to any of their fellow travelers.

^{11.} Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 83-94. See also his *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 77-102.

In a tour through the many finer and coarser moralities which have hitherto prevailed or still prevail on the earth, I have found certain traits recurring regularly together, and connected with one another, until finally two primary types revealed themselves to me, and a radical distinction was brought to light. There is *master-morality* and *slave-morality*. . . . The noble type of man regards *himself* as a determiner of values; he does not require to be approved of; he passes the judgment: "What is injurious to me is injurious in itself"; he knows that it is he himself only who confers honour on things; he is *creator of values*. He honours whatever he recognises in himself: such morality is self-glorification. . . . It is otherwise with the second type of morality, *slave-morality*. Supposing that the abused, the oppressed, the suffering, the unemancipated, the weary, and those uncertain of themselves should moralise, what will be the common element in their moral estimates? Probably a pessimistic suspicion with regard to the entire situation of man will find expression, perhaps a condemnation of man, together with his situation. The slave has an unfavourable eye for the virtues of the powerful; he has a skepticism and distrust, a *refinement* of distrust of everything "good" that is there honoured — he would fain persuade himself that the very happiness there is not genuine. On the other hand, *those qualities* which serve to alleviate the existence of sufferers are brought into prominence and flooded with light; it is here that sympathy, the kind, helping hand, the warm heart, patience, diligence, humility, and friendliness attain honour; for here these are the most useful qualities, and almost the only means of supporting the burden of existence. Slave-morality is essentially the morality of utility.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

They contribute nothing to the country they are visiting (except their cold cash) because they are only there to look and to take in a fresh set of experiences. Tourists never stay; they are always on the move. It is

this image, rather than that of the pilgrim, that appears to describe most aptly this new, privatized, experimental spirituality. Can we now put this search in clearer perspective?

Tourists; that's what we are becoming . . .

Tourists, we move through life, flitting from idea to idea, from novelty to novelty, from new person to new person,

Never settling, always moving . . .

Selecting the best sights, the highlights, the choice cuts, avoiding the mess on the edge of town, the slums, all the uncomfortable things, the struggle of really knowing people,

Never settling, always moving lest we hear the hollow clang
of our own emptiness . . .

Tourists; that's what we are becoming . . .

Inquisitive, curious, picking up the tidbits of other
people's depth . . .

Tourists, flicking through our snapshots, the paper thin
trophies of our click and run existence, filing them away,
loading the next roll of film,

Never settling, always moving,

Tourists; that's what we are becoming,

Tourists; that's what we are becoming . . .

Mark Greene, "Tourists"

To say, as Bloom does, that this spirituality is "gnosticism," and that gnosticism is the "American religion,"¹² is, from a historical and conceptual point of view, too heavy-handed to be helpful. Nevertheless,

12. This "religion," Harold Bloom argues, resolves itself into a spiritual quest in which the self is both subject and object of the search. His argument is that this quest underlies much overt religion which on the surface expresses itself doctrinally and in very different ways — Roman Catholic, Mormon, Seventh-Day Adventist, and Southern Baptist. See his *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992). As a part of his argument he claims that America is gnostic without knowing it: *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 183.

Bloom's case could be better made along slightly different, and more nuanced, lines.

The point of connection with the past is not so much gnosticism but, rather, a primal spirituality which, in the early period of the Church's life, came into expression as gnosticism. The theories of gnosticism were defeated and soon forgotten. However, the spirituality which they were seeking to explain is the point of connection with the past. It is this spirituality which is rooted in the self, which assumes the liberty either to oppose or appropriate external religious forms but is resolute in its opposition to having to submit to external religious authority. It is in these ways that we are also seeing the convergence between this primal spirituality and a resurgent paganism. Camille Paglia has spoken of "the never-defeated paganism of the West"¹³ now resurfacing. She says that there are always contradictory impulses in a culture. On the one side is the urge to cross boundaries, to expand moral limitations, to break taboos, and to do the impermissible. On the other side is the urge to define the boundaries, to forbid the transgressions, and to protect the sacred. Today, she argues, the impulse to expand, to break definitions, rules, and limitations is triumphing — and the most visible sign of this triumph is the widespread prevalence of pornography. That there may be some echoes in today's pornography of the old cult prostitution and the fertility rites that were part and parcel of ancient paganism is quite plausible. Yet it would be a mistake to limit the pagan impulse to its debased sexuality. Paganism was not just about sex. It was, as I shall argue, much more broadly about nature, about nature manifesting the divine, and in this there certainly are some parallels to this contemporary spiritual search. This suggests that the point of connection is not so much gnosticism as it is a spirituality which emerges from within the depths of the self of which gnosticism was but one expression and the contemporary spiritual resurgence is but another.

When Christian faith encountered this spirituality in the early centuries, Anders Nygren declares, it had arrived at "its hour of destiny."¹⁴ This was so because this spirituality was in its outworkings, in

13. Camille Paglia, *Sex, Art, and American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), vii.

14. Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip Watson (London: S.P.C.K., 1953), 30.

its beliefs, and its view of life, the polar opposite of what we find in Christian faith. It was an opponent. And the besetting temptation which the Church would encounter, sometimes in fierce ways and at other times in more subtle ways, was to wonder if it could lessen the fierceness of the competition by incorporating in itself elements of this pagan way of looking at the spiritual life. These two spiritualities, Christian and pagan, Nygren contrasts in the language of two very different kinds of love, *Agape* and *Eros*. From this time forth, and coming right down into the contemporary moment, the struggle is going to be how *Agape* is going to preserve itself from the persistent intrusions of *Eros*.

The opening salvos were, of course, fired in the conflict in the early church over gnosticism; today, they are being fired by the new spirituality. Although the gnosticism of the patristic period was only one particular expression of *Eros*, it is, nevertheless, worth revisiting because some of the fundamental issues were, on both sides, hammered out during this conflict and they continue to speak into our own time.

An Ancient Spirituality

Ancient gnosticism, like the contemporary spiritual search, was a very diverse movement and it is hard to provide a succinct definition of it. Irenaeus' survey shows how variegated the gnostic world was,¹⁵ though as a set of movements, as distinct from intellectual influences, none predated the Christian faith despite Bultmann's claim.¹⁶ The diversity of these movements arose from the fact that the influences behind them were different: some had their roots in Eastern theosophy, others Greek philosophical speculation, and still others mystical Judaism. These sources produced some very different outcomes among the competing schools of gnostic thought which took root in Egypt, Syria, and along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean. Over time, af-

15. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I, i, 1–I, vii, 5; I, xi, 1–I, xx, 3; I, xxiii, 1–I, xxxi, 4.

16. See Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Some Alleged Evidences for Pre-Christian Gnosticism," in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 46–70.

ter gnosticism had become a set of movements that paralleled the Church, it changed shape and in mid-career began to appropriate Christian ideas and attempted to incorporate Christian faith into its larger framework. In its final development it came right into the Church and, in thinkers like Valentinus, Marcion, and Basilides, it passed itself off as being an authentic expression of Christianity, thereby confounding definition even further. The word *gnostic*, which encapsulated the understanding of the mystical insight into the nature of things which the various thinkers and movements offered, therefore, meant something different depending on the school in question, its cultural location, its influences, and its stage of development within the overall movement.

It is not insignificant that these gnostic movements germinated in a time of social flux and of great uncertainty, at a time when the cultural nerve was failing in the Roman world, when the prevailing worldview was collapsing, and when the pursuit of what is spiritual offered itself as a way out, almost as an escape from the gathering cultural meltdown. It would be some time before the Roman world finally imploded, but its own writers were warning of the peril long before the barbarians stormed the gates of Rome in 410 A.D. Writers like Tacitus and Seneca, Nero's tutor, may have exaggerated the moral decline a little — moralists and satirists sometimes do — but in hindsight it appears that they saw the unraveling of the Roman empire with a clarity that many, especially those in power, lacked. Rome, Tacitus said, was a place to which all of the abominations of the world were drawn, a place where they met and multiplied and became popular, and Seneca observed that no amount of force could restrain or provide a remedy for the wickedness that was festering in the empire. The picture they and other writers of the period painted was one of power exercised ruthlessly without the restraints of conscience, of a culture in which the senses were gratified as character disintegrated, and where life had been cheapened and made expendable. It may well be, then, that when Rome finally fell it was less because it was conquered from without than because it had died of its own hand. This is the context in which gnosticism grew up, and it is not hard to see that there are echoes of this situation in contemporary Western societies today with their fallen cognitive ceilings, their loss of truth and moral

fabric, their hedonism, and their self-abandonment. It is these ingredients that are the stuff from which cultural meltdowns happen,¹⁷ and they are what impel people to seek ways to protect and cure their souls.

Gnosticism proved to be an especially nettlesome matter in the early church, not because the novelty of its ideas swept people off their feet, but because its ideas, in some important respects, already pervaded that ancient world. They seemed normal, natural, and familiar. There had already been a long history of thought on some of its key elements in the East. It is not clear how Eastern thought reached Greece, but classical Greek philosophy sometimes followed some of the important paths originally blazed in the East and these ideas had already permeated the world in which the Church had been planted.

Here, too, is an echo of our own times. The combination of a modernized social fabric and the Enlightenment ideology which took root in it until relatively recently produced, as we have seen, the autonomous self. This is the self which is not subject to outside authority and into which all reality has contracted itself. The result is a radicalized individualism whose outlook is deeply privatized and whose mood is insistently therapeutic. All of this has produced soil throughout society that positively invites the new spirituality. It seems normal and natural. That is why it is as difficult for the Church to contest today as was gnosticism in the early centuries.

Classical Greek philosophy, like Eastern thought, depreciated the natural world and pondered the soul's alienation from it. And like the philosophies of the East, Greek thought typically came to think of the soul as being not a divine creation but a shard which had fallen away from the All or Absolute and was now found in a human body. Its sense of alienation from the world came from the individuality by which it was now afflicted, individuality which expressed itself in thought and

17. Arnold Toynbee's massive *A Study of History* recounts the rise and fall of all of the major civilizations which have preceded ours. In volumes 3, 4, and 5, he discusses why civilizations break down and then disintegrate. The pattern at their end is very similar in most cases. What he describes as the "schism of the soul," which lies behind the outward breakdown, is strikingly similar to much of what we see in postmodernity. See his discussion in *A Study of History* (12 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1934-61), V, 376-568.

consciousness. The irresistible impulse which arose from this was, on the one hand, "to exalt the self-seeking spirit," as Thomas Molnar says,¹⁸ while thinking that one day all things will rejoin the primal, sacred reality. All paganism, in one way or another, is pantheistic.

Socrates: As the soul is immortal, has been born often and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things. As the whole of nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only — a process men call learning — discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection.

Plato, "Meno"

Greek philosophy struggled with how to relate the divine, which is remote and removed from life, with the soul and its struggles within the body. And that was where the gnostics pushed the argument forward one or two steps. At the heart of their spiritual quest was a search for the answer to evil. Wherever they looked, whether to the firmament above or to the bodies in which their consciousness resided, what they saw was a monumentally failed work, a creation that was awry, corrupt, nefarious, and dark. All gnostic systems of thought, as a result, were philosophically dualistic or semi-dualistic, positing that what had been made had been made by an enemy of human beings. There were differences of opinion as to how to work this all out, but typically it either led to the notion that there were two ultimate principles in the universe, one good and one bad, the latter being responsible for the creation; or that there was only one ultimate principle from whom a series of emanations and spirits had proceeded, one of whom was even-

18. Thomas Molnar, *The Pagan Temptation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 31.

tually so far from the source of good as to be able to bring about this wretched creation. What the various gnostic teachers sought to do was to bring understanding about the human plight, to inculcate insight about the very nature of things and, most importantly, to get people in touch with their spiritual natures. Only then could there be liberation from the clutches of what was evil. This, of course, is no easy matter, for we are all besieged in life by powers contrary to God. Indeed, *The Dialog of the Savior*, one of the gnostic tracts discovered at Nag Hammadi, even depicts the soul at the end of life as having to pass through heavenly realms which are infested by fearful, hostile powers. As each sphere is left behind in this journey, the bondage contributed by these heavenly beings is sloughed off until in the end the soul, thus emancipated from its assailants, arrives before the Savior.¹⁹

So what is the nature of this insight which held the key to self-liberation for these ancient gnostics? It is, of course, "knowledge." This was not really intellectual knowledge, though it was often accompanied by complex philosophical speculation. It was more of a private insight, an internal revelation, a spiritual perception, one given from within. Gnostics believed that they had dropped from a spiritual existence into the bodies in which they were trapped.²⁰ They were in search, Jacques Lecarriere says, of "a true consciousness" that would enable them "to cast off the shackles of this world" which had bound them in false understanding.²¹ It was not so much knowledge of God that was sought, for he was perceived to be ineffable, distant, removed, and unattainable. He is, as Valentinus said, "that Incomprehensible, In-

19. "The Dialog of the Savior," in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library*, trans. Members of the Coptic Gnostic Library Project of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 120-24.

20. Of the numerous illustrations of this truth is one found in the anonymous Nag Hammadi tract, "The Exegesis on the Soul." This likens the soul to a female who "even has a womb" and was content when she dwelled alone with God the Father. However, she fell away and became trapped in a body through which "she prostituted herself." However, in due time and after experiencing great wretchedness, she repented amidst much sighing and in his mercy the Father "will make her womb turn from the external domain and will turn it again inward, so that the soul will regain her proper character." For the whole tract, see Robinson, 180-87.

21. Jacques Lacarriere, *The Gnostics*, trans. Nina Rootes (London: Peter Owen, 1977), 11.

conceivable (One), who is superior to all thought" and who, in fact, is beyond the range of all human thought.²² They were far more interested in pursuing what was inside in the self. "Other religions," Robert Grant says, "are in varying measure God-centered," but the gnostic "is self-centered."²³ It is this self-knowledge which is redemptive. To know the self in its spiritual dimension is to be drawn into a union "with a reality," Hans Jonas writes, "that in truth is itself the supreme subject in the situation and strictly speaking never an object at all."²⁴ It was, therefore, knowledge of the divine through the self. More than that, it was about the self losing itself in the divine, being absorbed back into it, losing its own individuality and personhood. It is this monism, with its lost distinctions between the creator and the created self, that paganism and gnosticism have in common. Of course, the two are not identical: in paganism, this monism was also extended to the rest of creation; in gnosticism, the rest of the creation was seen to be alienated from God and as having been abandoned by him. However, when it came to the self, the two systems converged in their understanding.

This pursuit of knowledge of the self rested upon a double assumption. The first was, in modern terms, that theology is nothing other than anthropology. "For gnostics," Elaine Pagels explains, "exploring the *psyche* became explicitly what it is for many people today implicitly — a religious quest," not least because gnostics believed that a fragment of divinity was lodged somewhere in their interior world.²⁵ What they also assumed, second, is that people stumble, suffer, and make mistakes not because of sin, but because of ignorance. It was, of course, to remedy this ignorance that, in the Christian phase of gnosticism, the Son was seen as bringing "knowledge" of the Father — yet this was a far cry from knowledge as it is construed biblically. Thus

22. Valentinus, *Evangelium Veritatis*, IX, 5. This is the document found near Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945 which made its way to Europe and was eventually purchased by George H. Page, a Zurich resident, and given to the Jung Institute in honor of Carl Jung. The connections between Jungian psychoanalysis and early gnosticism were thereby acknowledged.

23. Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism & Early Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1966), 8.

24. Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 35.

25. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), 123.

it is that both ancient gnostics and those postmoderns who place such value on psychotherapeutic techniques do so because above all other things they value "the self-knowledge," Pagels notes, "which is insight."²⁶ And this self-knowledge functions in a revelatory way which is only possible, we need to note, because of the lost understanding of sin.²⁷ It is ignorance, ignorance of ourselves and especially of our spiritual nature, gnostics believed, that is the key to our ignorance of the nature of things, and of the grip which evil exercises invisibly on all things created and on ourselves not least. And it is the self which, in this situation, reveals its own connections into what is divine.

Exploring the unconscious, however, is no easy matter. Like the ocean in its depths, it surrenders its secrets only slowly and grudgingly. Gnostics spoke of the turmoil that was involved in coming to the knowledge of themselves, and clearly different levels of success were achieved. It was apparently this observation that led gnostics, according to Irenaeus, to speak of human beings as falling into three different classes: those naturally spiritual who are assured of salvation and of their election; those who are suspended in equilibrium between the forces of good and evil and whose destiny could go either way; and those who are irremediably held captive to what is evil because they are so thoroughly part and parcel of what is material.²⁸ This classification was used by some, though not by all gnostics, but which groups used the classification is less important than its assumption that psychic or gnostic insight is *natural* to some human beings. Not only so, but many of those who were thus spiritual also believed themselves to be emancipated from religious belief and even ethical practice, thus anticipating the extremes of postmodern individualism. If, then, gnosticism was dualistic, or semi-dualistic, philosophically, it was *naturalistic* soteriologically.

It is, of course, no surprise to discover that when gnostics sought to appropriate New Testament writings — a move that was vigorously contested by both Irenaeus and Tertullian on the grounds that these gnostics were attempting to purloin what did not belong to them — it

26. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 124.

27. The gnostic understanding of sin, especially among the Valentinians, is explored in Michel R. Desjardins, *Sin in Valentinianism* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).

28. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I, vi, 1-4.

was the Gospel of John, in particular, that they favored. And, of course, their central contention was that the Church had misunderstood the person of Christ because it insisted that Christ was God incarnate. This was impossible given the gnostic premise of the evil of the material body.²⁹ This disposition is nicely illustrated in the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* which solved the problem of a real incarnation by claiming that on the Cross Jesus called out, "My Power, my Power, why have you forsaken me?"³⁰ The power which had left Christ was obviously the power that had earlier descended upon him, perhaps at his baptism, had accompanied him through his ministry, but was departing because it was in no way incarnate in his body.

To suppose that divine revelation was tied into actual historical realities involved making a fundamental hermeneutical mistake, gnostics argued. That mistake was to read the gospel story literally, for that assumed the divine revelation and redemption came in and with the facts of Jesus' earthly life, his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. That simply could not be. These things, then, are but images. "To recognize their true meaning," Pagels writes, "one must come to see that these events do not in themselves *effect* redemption. Rather, they serve to symbolize the process of redemption that occurs within those who perceive their inner meaning."³¹ It was the Gospel of John,

29. It is ironic that the gnostic predilection for the Gospel of John persisted despite the unqualified rebuttal of gnostic views in John's epistles. The authenticity of the Spirit's presence is evidenced in the fact that, having brought about the miraculous conception, he now witnesses to it, John says, confessing "that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (I Jn. 4:2). There can be no thought here of an impermanent alliance between the Son and Jesus but, rather, the Son came into permanent union with the flesh of Jesus and this represented a frontal attack on gnostic views. Later John wrote of the "deceivers" who will not acknowledge "the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh" (II Jn. 7).

30. H. B. Swete, *The Akhmim Fragment of the Apocryphal Gospel of St. Peter* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 10.

31. Elaine Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1973), 14. Heracleon, Clement of Alexandria said, was the most famous exponent of the Valentinian school of thought but little is known of him. On his literary remains, see A. E. Brooke, *The Fragments of Heracleon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891). The importance of this commentary in the formulation of gnostic views is suggested by the fact that Origen cites it no fewer than fifty-two times in his efforts at refuting gnostic thinking.

more than the Synoptics, that lent itself to a “spiritual,” or symbolic reading and which more easily could be held up as a mirror in which the self could see itself reflected back. But what was apprehended in this way was not merely the self but, as the Valentinians argued, “depth” and “abyss” in, and with, and through it. Self-knowledge, then, was not merely knowledge of the self but also knowledge of what is ultimate through and in and with the self. This depth is what later psychotherapy would call the unconscious, and some would attribute to it religious reality. This knowledge, Pagels says of the Valentinian gnostics, “is not given to human experience, in their view, either in immediate sense-perception, or in rational and ethical reflection on such perception.”³² It is apprehended psychically.

One of the chief contentions of the gnostics in their polemic against the Church was that “knowledge,” in their understanding of it, is superior to “faith.” They might as well have said that they were pursuing spirituality, rather than religion, for that is what they meant. They were opposed to a doctrinally shaped and governed Christianity. They were instead pursuing enlightenment through the self, for this kind of understanding, they believed, was itself revelatory. This did not mean that they always eschewed organized religion, for some gnostics entered the churches and suggested that they were the most authentic realization of Christian faith. However, for them the Church was never more than a means toward the end of their pursuit of psychic knowledge, a circumstance being played out again in church after church in the postmodern world where consumer habits have hooked up with a therapeutic orientation that now is subjugating religion to spirituality and spirituality to private choice.

In one very important respect, however, gnosticism was the antithesis of paganism. Paganism was about nature; gnosticism was in flight from nature. Gnostics saw themselves as caught in a creation that is flawed, dark, ominous, whose rhythms bring no connections with anything divine, and whose God is far away, alienated, aloof, and incommunicative. In this respect, they were far removed from the pantheism which was at the heart of paganism. Speaking for gnostics of all times, Bloom argues that the creator God is a “bungler” who

^{32.} Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis*, 119-20.

“botched” the creation and precipitated the Fall.³³ This creation offers no home for the human being because, he argues, originally “the deepest self was not part of creation” but was part of the “fullness of God”³⁴ to which it yearns to return. This yearning, this homesickness, is what often passes as depression, he suggests. And yet, despite this significant difference, there is also an important point of convergence. “God,” Bloom tells us, “is at once deep within the self and also estranged, infinitely far off, beyond our cosmos.”³⁵ Here lies the point of connection with paganism: not in the worship of nature (cf. Rom. 1:18-24), but in the access to the sacred that is sought through the self, this “deepest self,” which experiences itself as being adrift from life, as not being able to fit in with life, and as offering an exit from the oppressive complexities and manifold pains of this “botched” creation into what is eternal.

A Spirituality of Postmodernity

It seems rather clear, then, that our contemporary spirituality is in continuity with some of the different aspects of what has preceded it. In some of its expressions it has more in common with paganism; in others it is more like gnosticism. New Age, for example, what Bloom mocks as “an endlessly entertaining saturnalia of ill-defined yearnings . . . suspended about halfway between feeling good and good feeling” and “a vacuity not to be believed,”³⁶ has affinities that are more obviously pagan, but this wider spirituality has some parallels with what was gnostic. We will explore three such parallels: first, that both gnosticism and the new spirituality have arisen in contexts which were experienced as inhospitable; second, that the two share a comparable understanding of the self; third, that the gnostics anticipated today’s postmodern expressive individualism.

^{33.} Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 27.

^{34.} Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 183.

^{35.} Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 30.

^{36.} Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 18-19.

The Empty Landscape

First, by an entirely different route from that taken in gnosticism, postmoderns have come to a similar conclusion regarding the alien and inhospitable environment in which we are bound to live. For the gnostics, this sense was rooted in the belief that the human self had been abandoned by God to live out its life in a flawed and unfriendly creation; for postmoderns, this sense of alienation, of not being at home, arises not from a particular view of the creation itself, but from the artificial environment we have built upon it in our soulless cities: the mindless repetition of the modern workplace, the cruelty of the economic tides which flow in and out without regard to human suffering, the numbing effect of bureaucracy, and the impersonal tenor of human relations in a society that values specialized functions over the people themselves. It is true, of course, that the modernization of the Western world has also filled it with abundance and with relief from so many of the ills that once afflicted life. It is offering up new possibilities, new choices, and an astounding array of new opportunities. Yet, at the same time, we live with more anxiety, more loneliness, more meaninglessness, a deeper sense of having been uprooted from family, place, and work. And the technology that has produced miracle drugs and genetically altered foods has also produced a world more dangerous and threatening than ever before with its nuclear bombs, its chemical and biological weapons, and its pollution. What has enabled us to progress in some ways also casts its own long, dark shadow across life in other ways.

Still it may seem paradoxical that in the very moment of this Western triumph, cracks are also appearing in the human spirit. But this realization is what, in fact, distinguishes the postmodern sensibility from an Enlightenment one, and it is what is making the emerging parallel to gnosticism easier to see. Gnosticism grew up in a world whose inner fabric was increasingly frayed and damaged, a world that would be overcome by crises of its own making, and long before it finally collapsed there was foreboding in the air. Gnosticism had an explanation of why life seemed so dark and threatening — and the answer, of course, was that it is dark and threatening because it is the expression of its evil creator — and offered itself as a path away from the chaos. It was, in that sense, an escape. The typical postmodern atti-

tude toward creation is, of course, quite different, but the search for spiritual life is often undertaken in the presence of a foreboding about life which is comparable. And it is often seeking an escape into a larger reality as well.

Modernity, which has so powerfully reduced all of life to a this-worldly reality, has left postmoderns, it seems, with only two choices. Either the self can see itself as being purely immanent in this world, its sum entirely contained within the larger equation of modernized life with no remainder, or it can attempt its own breakout, to transcend itself, to wrench itself loose to seek its own greater reality in its own way. If it is seen as immanent, it typically melds itself into the life and pleasures of a consumer society. The pursuit of happiness becomes the pursuit of consumption and diversion and “in this society,” Walker Percy observes, “the possibilities of diversion are endless and as readily available as eight hours of television a day: TV, travel, drugs, games, newspapers, magazines, Vegas.”³⁷ Yet a life of such complete immanence always must contend against patches, if not long stretches, of unrelieved boredom and emptiness. This is an affliction apparently not visited on other animals but it has become a painful part of the modern human condition. It is what may produce, in varying degrees of intensity, a hunger for what is Other, what is outside the realm of nature, something that is other than commerce and distraction, even for what is outside the realm of normality, something — no matter how obscure, abnormal, or irrational — which will illumine the moment and suffuse the soul with a sense of connectedness to something larger. We are not alone in the cosmos, we will be able to surmise: our small, contorted existence is actually part of a larger and more significant picture. We are part of an unseen world. We are coming to glimpse the real meaning of things. And in this contemporary spiritual quest, as was the case in gnosticism, it is often assumed that some people are naturally spiritual whereas others are not. Some have an inborn knack for seeing what others cannot see. In reality, of course, the spiritual realm in which psychological connection is being sought often turns out to be elusive. It is not easily found and so experimentation becomes the

³⁷ Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 12.

means of its discovery. Experimentation invariably leads to an eclectic outcome as assorted beliefs and practices are cobbled together pragmatically into what become private spiritualities.

The path that this spiritual yearning has taken in the contemporary world was not unanticipated. The modernization of our world, the transformation of its social fabric, impacts human consciousness in profound ways. And what we have to notice in particular are the ways in which our experience of pluralism rattles through our consciousness. For ours is a world in which options multiply like fruit flies, as we have seen. There is too much to choose between in every area of life. We are bombarded by information and we are constantly having to choose what beliefs we will follow, what styles we will adopt, what kind of people we would like to be. We speak of having "lifestyles" which include matters such as how well we choose to live, with whom we want to live, what kind of beliefs and moral norms we will or will not accept. In all of these ways we choose who we want to be and nothing is allowed to impose itself on us from the outside.

As the objective world loses its hold upon us, as the world we know offers fewer and fewer certainties in life precisely because it churns up more and more choices, as more and more of what we experience appears random and unpredictable, we find ourselves searching for a more stable reality within ourselves. "If answers are not provided objectively by society," Berger writes, then people are compelled to "turn inward." The result is that modern "Western culture," he says, "has been marked by an ever-increasing attention to subjectivity."³⁸ This attention has taken different turns but it seems rather clear that the current spiritual search is one of them. It is the resonance within modern consciousness of a profoundly pluralized world, a world stripped of the old certainties, and in which the human being has been uprooted and now lives a kind of psychologically solitary existence, a cork bobbing upon the ocean surface while the currents below move it one way and then another.

This new spiritual quest, then, seems to be rooted in a sense of homelessness in the modern world, of having been abandoned in a

³⁸ Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (New York: Anchor Press, 1979), 21.

place where we no longer fit, and in consequence it is reaching out for something more certain, more real, more substantial. And, insofar as it is a quintessentially modern experience, it is light years away from the earlier gnosticism. Yet parallels are not entirely absent for the gnostics, for an entirely different set of reasons, also felt homeless. Philosophically, the new spirituality is not replicating some of the old gnostic theories about reality, but at a psychological level the parallels are unmistakable.

"My Own Little Voice"

A second parallel between this contemporary spirituality and ancient gnosticism is that today's approach to the sacred is also through the self and within the self and in this sense it is "self-centered." Perhaps those who imagine that their real self once existed within the "fullness" of God and has fallen out of the heavens to be trapped in a created body where it exists in this uncongenial and uncomfortable realm only as a "divine spark" are few in number. Yet the idiosyncratic nature of this view should not obscure the fact that it has in common with many others the thought that it is in the self, in its depths, that one encounters a Reality which is not material, one that is not of this (modernized) world, and one that provides access into something greater and more authentic than what is merely encountered through the senses. It is thus that the self is both the means of engaging this Reality and the object of the engagement. It is in the self that one finds one's exit from a world of conflict, tension, danger, and boredom, and in the self that one also finds some intimations about how to live. It is upon this assumption about the self that paganism, gnosticism, and this contemporary spirituality all converge.

From this flows a changed moral perspective. For the older paganisms, at least, there was no such thing as objective, universal truth because there was no single God who alone existed and who had uniquely revealed himself. There was instead a multitude of divine presences and therefore all truth was relative to those divine beings. The gods and goddesses have gone in the Western world today but so, too, has the single God who alone exists and who has uniquely revealed himself. In the postmodern world, truth is now relative, not to the mul-

Sheila Larson is a young nurse who has received a good deal of therapy and who describes her faith as "Sheilaism." "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." Sheila's faith has some tenets beyond belief in God, though not many. In defining "my own Sheilaism" she says: "It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with your self. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think he would want us to take care of each other."

Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*

titude of gods and goddesses, but to the multitude of human knowers. The categories of true and false, right and wrong, therefore fall away and are replaced by a different kind of distinction: religion which is useful as opposed to that which is not. Given our cultural climate, religion which is useful is that which is therapeutically helpful. And the need to discern between what is true and what is false, we have come to think, is a bad habit which needs to be abandoned.

Both then and now, access to what is unfallen and unperverted is to be had through the self. Gnostics believed, as do many of those in this contemporary spiritual quest, that the moment spiritual perceptions are codified into dogma or doctrine, the moment these insights become part and parcel of corporately practiced religious life, with its rules and authorities, its expectations and sanctions, the insight has already become corrupted. It is the reality of the deeper self which is put in jeopardy by religion — which, of course, was Emerson's contention, too. Spirituality, they believe, is threatened by religion.

When Wade Clark Roof analyzed the spirituality of the Baby Boom Generation, he noted the fundamental cleavage which has been tracked in these pages: "*Spirit* is the inner, experiential aspect of religion," he wrote, and "*institution* is the outer, established form of religion."³⁹ From

39. Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 30.

this bifurcation arose the further distinction that Boomers are "believers" in the sense that they give credence to their own interior perceptions and intuitions, but they are not "belongers" in the sense that they give much credence to doctrine formulated by others, to traditions passed along through the Church, or to the corporate practice of faith. It is the "inwardness" of direct experience within the self that is most persuasive. Indeed, 80% of Americans, across the generations, believe that people should arrive at their own beliefs independently of religious institutions such as churches and synagogues. And 60% take this view a step further. On the grounds that people have God "within them," churches and synagogues, they believe, are unnecessary. Clearly what Roof was seeing was a *cultural* habit and not, as his book suggests, a generational one. If there is a generational factor which is present it is found in the fact that those who are younger are more likely than those who are older to have been engulfed by ideas of their own autonomy, to be disenchanted with religious institutions (though this may be reversing itself),⁴⁰ and to have been more deeply affected by the massive waves of change that have washed across American life in the last five decades in particular.

What is now strikingly clear is how different this contemporary spiritual quest is from the way in which spirituality has been understood in the life of the Church in the past. Some of these differences have already been noted but one more needs to be touched on. In the long history of the Church, what is spiritual has typically been seen as being mediated by, as being compatible with, and as requiring the rhythms of, churchly life and its doctrines. Where churchly life and spiritual life have no longer fed into each other, irruptions of protest have soon followed. In the late Middle Ages, there were Hus and Wycliffe; still later, there were the Protestant Reformers and Anabaptists; then there were the Puritans; and later still there were the Wesleys and Whitefield. Sometimes the protest was sustained within existing church life. John Wesley, for example, declared that he had lived as an Anglican and that he wished to die as one. Circumstances, in time, did lead to his creating parallel religious forms from which

40. This is the argument advanced by Colleen Carroll, *The New Faithful: Why Young Adults Are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002).

arose a new denomination and yet his primary disposition was to work within Anglicanism. The Protestant Reformers earlier on had taken a different tack, one that was, in fact, forced upon them. They left the Catholic Church but they then developed different church forms that were consistent with their doctrines concerning the sole authority of Scripture, the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone, and the centrality of Christ. They did not simply slough off the church. In each of these cases, and many more like them, the quest for a more whole, more biblical spirituality went hand in hand with finding better ways of expressing that spirituality ecclesiastically and confessionally. In contemporary terms, spirituality and religion were seen as the necessary aspects of a single whole and as indispensable to each other.

By contrast, this contemporary spiritual search is inclined to oppose itself to religion, to doctrine as a set of unchanging beliefs, to the public and institutional forms in which that spirituality might be expressed. While it is the case that the various religions are sometimes raided for their ideas, today's spirituality remains a deeply privatized matter whose access to reality is through a pristine, uncorrupted self. And all of this happens without any necessary reference to, or connection with, others. With its individualism, its wholly privatized understanding, its therapeutic interest, its mystical bent, its experimental habits, its opposition to truth as something which mediates the nature of an unchanging spiritual realm, its anti-institutional bias, its tilt toward the East, its construction of reality, and its can-do spirit, it is something which is emerging from the very heart of the postmodern world. This is, in fact, the postmodern soul. And its ancient forerunner was seen in gnosticism.

It's About Me

Third, this postmodern individualism has its own unique ways of thinking, ways that reflect both the American experience and the passage it has taken through our modernized world. It is not difficult to see that here, too, that there are some parallels to ancient gnosticism.

One of the distinctive characteristics of American life that has already been noted is its individualism, now transposed into the idea of the autonomous self. In its earlier life, when Alexis de Tocqueville was

observing it in the nineteenth century, individualism worked through moral character, producing the "inner-directed" person, to use David Riesmann's language.⁴¹ This was the person whose sense of duty and responsibility was worked out of an inward sense as to what was right and what was wrong. Thinking for oneself, taking care of oneself, being self-dependent, and being able to stand alone became the virtues in which this kind of individualism expressed itself — but these virtues most commonly flowered in communities, not in isolation from others. This was the kind of person who, drawing strength from within, did not live for the approval of others, did not die by their disapproval, and chose, instead, to be his or her own person. This sometimes meant acting alone, being independent, and so in the constellation of virtues in this older kind of individualism prominent were courage, fortitude, and hardiness.

In the 1950s and 1960s, however, this kind of individualism began to undergo a drastic change, the "inner directed" person evolving into an "other-directed" person, not finding the grounding for action in an inner moral core but finding it, instead, in the approval of others. With the passage of time and the growing commercial tempo, compelling surrogates for inner virtue could be found easily in peer groups, fashion fads, and the latest trends. It is acceptance with others which now becomes the preeminent goal, and the most dreaded outcome is to become an outcast. It is fitting in, not standing out. It is thus the transformation of the older moral core into a psychological disposition, character into personality, and human nature into the self.⁴² As various as are the forms which this kind of individualism takes, the common element is, as Bellah puts it, that "the self becomes the main form of reality"⁴³ and the pursuit of its rights and unique intuitions, even in the face of others, is what life is about.

It is not hard to see how the older virtues of thinking for oneself

41. I am here summarizing what I have stated more fully in my *No Place for Truth; or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 141-61.

42. See Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 2002).

43. Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 143.

and acting for oneself passed into a kind of spirituality in which this same self-reliance was worked out in relation to the divine. It was in the individual, not in dependence on others, or even on outward rituals and doctrines of the past, that God was to be found. In its earlier phase this produced a much sturdier kind of spiritual individualism than its expressive, contemporary counterpart today. Today's spirituality is far more likely to be about self-healing and it is far more likely to see itself in consumer terms.

What is the aboriginal Self, on which universal reliance may be grounded? What is the nature and power of that science-baffling star, without parallel, without calculable elements, which shoots a ray of beauty even into trivial and impure actions, if the least mark of independence appear? The inquiry leads us to that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct. We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are intuitions. In that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find common origin. For, the sense of being which in calm hours rises, we know not how, in the soul, is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them, and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed. . . . The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure that it is profane to interpose helps.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*

Clear contrasts now emerge. Traditional Christian spirituality is self-abnegating. It values self-sacrifice and self-discipline, a sacrifice and a discipline which is required by the moral world it inhabits. Because of the felt obligation to curtail and discipline the self, traditional spirituality lives within doctrine that is true and wants to live with corporately practiced faith, at least if that faith has some authenticity, even when there are the expected jolts that come with human rela-

tions. Contemporary spirituality which opposes itself to religion is spirituality which, by contrast, is about the business of self-realization, or self-discovery, and is assuming, as Bloom puts it, that real knowledge is found in "an inward knowledge rather than an outward belief."⁴⁴ More than that, it is also refusing to live within parameters and boundaries which are drawn by others, within doctrine which it has not constructed, within a corporately practiced belief since that would do violence to the delicacy and authenticity of its own private sensibility.

This spirituality has clear parallels with paganism, but that is not all that it is. While this pagan impulse parallels what was evident in the early gnosticism, it must also be said that it is thoroughly postmodern. This is the kind of spirituality which goes hand in hand with a flexible biography, with the ability to reinvent one's self, remake one's self, shift and adapt consonant with the constantly shifting demands of a virile economy and workplace and with the changing topography of moral reality. It is the psychological counterpart to the market-driven economy and the collapse of moral absolutes. Settled, unmoving convictions, an inward core of moral belief, easily become impediments to the need to be able to make quick adaptations as changed contexts might require. This, then, is the spirituality of those on the move, those who live in the interstices of the postmodern world, those who know its rhythms, its demands, and the punishments which it inflicts on any who are unwilling to shift as it shifts, those who will not change as it changes, those who look askance at expediency. This is a spirituality, then, that is as contemporary as is contemporary society but, in other ways, as ancient as the world is ancient.

Confrontation, Not Tactics

Seeing how this spiritual search is both contemporary and ancient is really the key to understanding how to think about it from a Christian point of view. To put the matter succinctly: those who see only the contemporaneity of this spirituality — and who, typically, yearn to be seen as being contemporary — usually make tactical maneuvers to win

44. Bloom, *Omens of Millennium*, 235.

a hearing for their Christian views; those who see its underlying world-view will not. Inevitably, those enamored by its contemporaneity will find that with each new tactical repositioning they are drawn irresistibly into the vortex of what they think is merely contemporary but what, in actual fact, also has the power to contaminate their faith. What they should be doing is thinking strategically, not tactically. To do so is to begin to see how ancient this spirituality actually is and to understand that beneath many contemporary styles, tastes, and habits there are also encountered rival *worldviews*. When rival worldviews are in play, it is not adaptation that is called for but confrontation: confrontation not of a behavioral kind which is lacking in love but of a cognitive kind⁴⁵ which holds forth “the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). This is one of the great lessons learned from the early Church. Despite the few who wobbled, most of its leaders maintained with an admirable tenacity the alternative view of life which was rooted in the apostolic teaching. They did not allow love to blur truth or to substitute for it but sought to live by both truth and love.

A worldview is a framework for understanding the world. It is the perspective through which we see what is ultimate, what is real, what our experience means, and what our place is in the cosmos. It is in

45. The dominant view among sociologists of religion has been that the circumstances of modernity threaten traditional believing because modern life is so replete with multiple forms of diversity and because the public square has been so stripped of all symbols of religion that it becomes highly implausible that the contents of the faith are true. This theory has been explored relative to evangelicalism, for example, in James Hunter's two books, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983) and *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). More recently Christian Smith has challenged this view and argued instead that American evangelicalism is actually strengthened by the diversity and pluralism by which it is surrounded. It is “strong not because it is shielded against, but because it is — or at least perceives itself to be — embattled with forces that seem to oppose or threaten it.” He goes on to say that “evangelicalism *thrives* on the tensions this threat creates. Without these, evangelicalism would lose its identity and purpose and grow languid and aimless” (Christian Smith et al., *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998], 89). However, it is doubtful that Smith's argument is actually an alternative to Hunter's. Modernity does threaten evangelical faith and evangelical faith is strengthened when it confronts the worldview modernity represents.

For Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or custom. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life. This doctrine of theirs has not been discovered by the ingenuity and deep thought of inquisitive men, nor do they put forward a merely human teaching, as some people do. . . . They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey established laws, but in their own lives they go far beyond what the laws require. They love all men, and by all men are persecuted. They are unknown, and still they are condemned; they are put to death, and yet they are brought to life. They are poor, and yet they make many rich; they are completely destitute, and yet they enjoy complete abundance. They are dishonored, and in their very dis-honor are glorified; they are defamed, and are vindicated. They are reviled, and yet they bless; when they are affronted, they still pay due respect. When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; undergoing punishment, they rejoice because they are brought to life. They are treated by the Jews as foreigners and enemies, and are hunted down by the Greeks; and all the time those who hate them find it impossible to justify their enmity.

Anonymous, “Letter to Diognetus”

these ways, as I have suggested, that we might speak of postmodernity as having a worldview despite the denials of its advocates and practitioners. What they are denying is having an *Enlightenment* worldview, one which is rationally structured and, from their perspective, one that is pretentious because it is claiming to know much too much. Everyone, however, has a worldview, even if it is one which posits no meaning and even if it is one which is entirely private and true only for the person who holds it.

We must go further, however. It is not just any worldview that we encounter in the postmodern world, but one that increasingly resembles the old paganism. It is one that is antithetical to that which bibli-

cal faith requires. It is this transformation of our world, this emerging worldview, which has passed largely unnoticed. That, at least, is the most charitable conclusion that one can draw. For while the evangelical Church is aware of such things as the fight for gay and lesbian rights, hears about the eco-feminists, knows about pornography, has a sense that moral absolutes are evaporating like the morning mist, knows that truth of an ultimate kind has been dislodged from life, it apparently does not perceive that in these and many other ways a new worldview is becoming ensconced in the culture. If it did, it surely would not be embracing with enthusiasm as many aspects of this postmodern mindset as it is or be so willing to make concessions to postmodern habits of mind.⁴⁶

This casual embrace of what is postmodern has increasingly led to an embrace of its spiritual yearning without noticing that this embrace carries within it the seeds of destruction for evangelical faith. The contrast between biblical faith and this contemporary spirituality is that between two entirely different ways of looking at life and at God. Nygren, some years ago, used the Greek words for two different kinds

46. The dichotomy which postmodern epistemology wants to force is one between knowing everything exhaustively or knowing nothing certainly at all. And since it would be arrogant in the extreme to claim to know what God alone knows the only other option, it seems, is to accept the fact that our knowledge is so socially conditioned, so determined by our own inability to escape our own relativity, that we are left with no certain knowledge of reality at all. This is the epistemological position accepted by Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh. All attempts at "getting reality" right, they say, have proved to be failures and Christians should concede as much. See their *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995). From a slightly different angle, Brian McLaren has adopted as a positive, even God-directed development, the disjunction between spirituality and religion. The religion in question for him is still evangelical but the disjuncture he promotes leaves behind a faith that is suspicious of reason, resistant to formulated beliefs, and allergic to structures within which faith is practiced, and, of course, it is dismissive of worldviews. Unless these attitudes are allowed to reshape the way Christianity is lived out, he believes, it is doomed to die. Here, indeed, is the old liberal fear of becoming outdated coupled with the postmodern infatuation with spirituality in its divorce from religion. See his *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001). In the cases of Middleton, Walsh, and McLaren, then, the adoption of a postmodern worldview is not inadvertent at all but knowing and deliberate. The consequences of this for the Church will be explored in a subsequent chapter.

of love, *Eros* and *Agape*, to characterize these worldviews, and his elucidation is still helpful. In the one worldview, which he calls *Eros*, it is the self which is in the center. In the other, which he calls *Agape*, it is God who is in the center. *Eros*, Nygren says, has at its heart a kind of want, longing, or yearning.⁴⁷ It is this fact, of course, which has always put the Church in something of a conundrum. Is this yearning a natural preparation for the gospel, human nature crying out in its emptiness, calling out to be filled with something else? It was this thought that led Clement of Alexandria in the early church to speak of the "true Christian gnostic" as if gnosticism's yearning for what was spiritual reached its fulfillment in Christian faith. Yet if this yearning is a preparation, it is one that stands in need of serious purging for it carries within itself an understanding about God and salvation which is diametrically opposed to what we have in biblical faith. In this sense, it is less a preparation and more of a wrong turn. Why is this so?

The movement of *Eros* spirituality is upward. Its essence, its drive, is the sinner finding God. The movement of *Agape*, by contrast, is downward. It is all about God finding the sinner. *Eros* spirituality is the kind of spirituality which arises from human nature and it builds on the presumption that it can forge its own salvation. *Agape* arises in God, was incarnate in Christ, and reaches us through the work of the Holy Spirit opening lives to receive the gospel of Christ's saving death. In this understanding, salvation is given and never forged or manufactured. *Eros* is the projection of the human spirit into eternity, the immortalizing of its own impulses. *Agape* is the intrusion of eternity into the fabric of life coming, not from below, but from above. *Eros* is human love. *Agape* is divine love. Human love of this kind, because it has need and want at its center, because it is always wanting to have its needs and wants satisfied, will always seek to control the object of its desires. That is why in these new spiritualities it is the spiritual person who makes up his or her beliefs and practices, mixing and matching and experimenting to see what works best, and assuming the prerogative to discard at will. The sacred is therefore loved for what can be had from loving it. The sacred is pursued because it has value to the pursuer and that value is measured in terms of the therapeutic payoff.

47. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 210.

There is, therefore, always a profit-and-loss mentality to these spiritualities.

By contrast, in Agape faith, God is not loved simply for the benefits that flow from that loving such as the forgiveness of sins. He is loved for what he is in himself. If Eros loves the sacred because it is worth doing, Agape, by contrast, loves God without ulterior motives. Agape surrenders; Eros grasps. Agape loves simply and only because it should, because God is most lovable. This Agape faith loves God because it is the consequence of his Agape and in his love there is no calculation. It is a completely free and spontaneous love. He is to be worshipped even if there are no returns. Furthermore, he is sovereign and cannot be controlled or manipulated within the human spirit. Indeed, he is not even found naturally in the human spirit. His salvation is not by mystical technique or psychological understanding but by grace, grace alone, grace coming from the outside, and grace that will not tolerate any human contribution. In Eros spirituality there is always a sense of self-sufficiency, one which is also suffused with pride; in Agape faith, it is precisely the recognition of the self's spiritual insufficiency that is the condition for the coming of grace. The one tries to storm eternity borne up on its own mortal wings; the other receives eternity as the pauper does the help which kindness extends.

Contemporary spiritualities must be recognized as a form of temptation. The question they raise, as Barth rightly suggested, is whether the Church is able to take its own revelation seriously. For what these spiritualities do is to invite the Church, theology, and faith "to abandon their theme and object and become hollow and empty, mere shadows of themselves."⁴⁸ They do so in their assumption that Christian faith is simply one member in this vast extended spiritual family and one that is not particularly enlightened. And the historic stance of the Church is that this is false. Christian faith, constituted by the Word of God and the Spirit of God, is not just an outcropping of human beings' internal spirituality but something which, in its supernatural construction, in its uniqueness, stands apart from all other

48. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson et al., ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (5 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936-77), I, ii, 283. Barth, in this section, is speaking of "religion" but he views the functioning of religion in much the same way as I have been considering spirituality.

My first principle is this. Christ laid down one definite system of truth which the world must believe without qualification, and which we must seek precisely in order to believe it when we find it. Now you cannot search indefinitely for a single definite truth. You must seek until you find, and when you find, you must believe. Then you have simply to keep what you have come to believe, since you also believe that there is nothing else to believe, and therefore nothing else to seek, once you have found and believed what he taught who bids you seek nothing beyond what he taught.

Tertullian, "Prescription Against Heretics"

spiritualities. It is by the Word of God, given to the Church, that all religions and all spiritualities are to be judged. The "faith" of the spiritual seeker and the faith of the Christian believer may, in some ways, look alike but, in fact, they are radically different.⁴⁹ The one is the upward questing of the human spirit which speaks of human emptiness and uncertainty; the other is the work of God which speaks of his grace and judgment. As authentic as the human questing may be, it is still in biblical terms, unbelief. For the searching is not a search of the one *locus* in which God has spoken and decisively acted; it is a searching for its own sake, a searching for its own rewards. In religion of a Christian kind, we listen; in spirituality of a contemporary kind, we talk. In religion of a Christian kind, we accept a gift; in spirituality of a contempo-

49. The critique which Budde and Brimlow make of the expression of this spirituality which they describe in the corporate world is that it is marginalizing the Church by assuming many of its prerogatives, concepts, and symbols. It transforms ideas like transcendence, vocation, and covenant, and fills them with meaning that is individualistic and which fits in with the corporation's goals of profit and efficiency. The net result, they suggest, is that something like Gresham's Law has now been set to work: "just as bad and counterfeit money drives down the worth of legitimate currency, so too might the tepid and superficial nature of corporate spirituality diminish the capacity to desire and appreciate more substantive notions of faith, commitment, and vocation." Michael Budde and Robert Brimlow, *Christianity Incorporated: How Big Business Is Buying the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 53.

rary kind, we try to seize God. In the one, we are justified by the righteousness of Christ; in the other, we strive to justify ourselves through ourselves. It is thus that spirituality is the enemy of faith.

The rebel defies more than he denies. Originally, at least, he does not suppress God; he merely talks to him as an equal. But it is not a polite dialogue. It is a polemic animated by the desire to conquer. The slave begins by demanding justice and ends by wanting to wear a crown. He must dominate in his turn. His insurrection against his condition becomes an unlimited campaign against the heavens for the purpose of bringing back a captive king who will first be dethroned and finally condemned to death. Human rebellion ends in metaphysical revolution. It progresses from appearances to acts, from the dandy to the revolutionary. When the throne of God is overturned, the rebel realizes that it is now his own responsibility to create the justice, order, and unity that he sought in vain within his own condition, and in this way to justify the fall of God.

Albert Camus, *The Rebel*

Many in the new seeker-sensitive experiment in “doing church” have seen only the surface habits of this postmodern world and have not really understood its Eros spirituality. Theirs is an experiment in tactics in which innumerable questions have been asked about the ways the Church can become successful in this culture and they are all prefaced by the word *how*. How do we get the Boomers back into the church? How do we get on the wavelength of Generation Xers? How do we do worship so that the transition from home to church, from mall to church, and from unbelief into a context of belief, is seamless and even unnoticed? How do we speak about Christian faith to those who only want techniques for survival in life? How can we be motivational for those who need a lift without burdening them? How can we say what we want to say in church when the audience will give us only a small slice of their attention, especially if we are not amusing? And what is

emerging, as the evangelical Church continues to empty itself of theology, is that it now finds that it is tapping, wittingly or not, into this broad cultural yearning for spirituality, and capitalizing on that disposition's inclination not to be religious. Evangelical spirituality without theology, that even sometimes despises theology, parallels almost exactly the broader cultural spirituality that is without religion. Evangelical faith without theology, without the structure and discipline of truth, is not Agape faith but it is much closer to Eros spirituality.

This, however, is not understood. Church talk about “reaching” the culture turns, almost inevitably, into a discussion about tactics and methodology, not about worldviews. It is only about tactics and not about strategy. It is about seduction and not about truth, about success and not about confrontation. However, without strategy, the tactics inevitably fail; without truth, all of the arts of seduction which the churches are practicing sooner or later are seen to be the empty charade that they are; and because the emerging worldview is not being engaged, the Church has little it can really say. Indeed, one has to ask how much it actually wants to say. Biblical truth contradicts this cultural spirituality, and that contradiction is hard to bear. Biblical truth displaces it, refuses to allow it its operating assumptions, declares to it its bankruptcy. Here, indeed, is an anti-god, dressed up in the garb of authenticity, but whose world is a world of fiction. Is the evangelical Church faithful enough to explode the worldview of this new spiritual search? Is it brave enough to contradict what has wide cultural approval? The verdict may not be finally in but it seems quite apparent that while the culture is burning, the evangelical Church is fiddling precisely because it has decided it must be so like the culture to be successful.

To speak of this engagement with culture in the language of confrontation is, no doubt, an offense to sensitive evangelical ears, especially to those who consider postmodern culture to be neutral and innocent and all of it a matter only of taste and preference, and it will be especially offensive to those who are most comfortable only when they are blending in and using it to achieve their own churchly success. That, unfortunately, has been a besetting sin among God's people going back to the beginning of the Old Testament record. And the prophets

found, over and over again, that those who have blended in most successfully are those most intent on not being dislodged.

Yet confrontation is always at the heart of the relation between Christ and culture because that relation is one of light in its relation to darkness, truth to false belief, and holiness to what is fallen. It is a confrontation that can take place only if the Church is engaged with culture. Those who, in Niebuhr's typology, adopt a "Christ against culture" position — such as some of the Anabaptists in the Reformation period or the Amish today — are those who withdraw from culture or who minimize their engagement with it. But this posture merely internalizes the felt confrontation and that is entirely inadequate. There can be no transformation of culture by those who have taken themselves outside of it, either physically or mentally, because transformation comes by engagement. It is not until the culture has been engaged by biblical truth, the biblical truth by which it is judged, that the Church has discharged its responsibility. It is then that the culture is judged by him who is the Truth, by him who is above culture and without whom neither rational life in a culture, nor its best intentions, or even its deepest experiences, can ever blossom into true spiritual life. That being the case, a response to this new spirituality needs to be formulated from three complementary perspectives. First, that the self is fragmented, not innocent; second, that truth is public, not private; third, that reality is personal, not impersonal.

Fragmented, Not Innocent

The premise beneath all of these spiritualities is that sin has not intruded upon the relation between the sacred and human nature, that human nature itself offers access — indeed, we assume unblemished access — to God, that human nature itself mediates the divine. Gone are the days when people understood that an avalanche has fallen between God and human beings, that human nature retains its shape as made in the image of God but has lost its relationship to God and stands in pained alienation from him.

It is no small anomaly that we have arrived at this point. How can we be so knowledgeable about evil in the world and so innocent about

sin in ourselves? Is it not strange that we who see so much tragedy through television, who are so knowledgeable of the darkness in our world, who can now mock the pretensions of the Enlightenment with its empty hopes of human progress, who pride ourselves on being able to stare with clear eyes and no denials at what is messy, untidy, ugly, and painful, who know only too well the relentless pressures of the modernized world, the overflow of tension, the unhappiness, and anxiety which are spilling across life, are also those who know so little about sin in ourselves? The manifestations of sin are before our eyes, indeed, in our very experience, and yet we have lost the conceptual language to name it for what it is. We are speechless before our own darkness. And, ironically, this inability to name our sin also means, as Barbara Taylor has said, that the language of grace will be eviscerated "since the full impact of forgiveness cannot be felt apart from the full impact of what has been forgiven."⁵⁰

The reason, of course, is that we have lost the moral world in which sin is alone understood.⁵¹ The religious authorities that once gave us rules for life and who gave us the metaphysical world in which those rules found their grounding have all faded in our moral imagination. Today, we are more alone in this world than any previous generation.⁵²

The consequence is that we have come to believe that the self retains its access to the sacred, an access not ruptured by sin. In 2002, a national survey by Barna turned up the astounding discovery that despite all of the difficulties which modernized life has created, despite its rapaciousness, greed, and violence, 74% of those surveyed rejected the idea of original sin and 52% of evangelicals concurred. These were the percentages of respondents who agreed with the statement that

50. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2000), 6-7.

51. See Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995). See also David B. Morris' reflections on this theme in his essay, "The Plot of Suffering: AIDS and Evil," in *Evil After Postmodernism: Histories, Narratives, Ethics*, ed. Jennifer L. Geddes (New York: Routledge, 2001), 57-64.

52. James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth: What People Really Believe about Everything That Matters* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1991), 27.

"when people are born they are neither good nor evil — they make a choice between the two as they mature."⁵³ Here is raw American individualism, the kind that "places the burden of one's own deepest self-definitions on one's own individual choice," to use Bellah's words,⁵⁴ and here is the heresy of Pelagianism which asserts that people are born innocent of sin, that sin is a set of bad practices which is caught later on in life rather like a disease.

Sin, however, is not some small aberration, some violation of inconsequential Church rules; it is the clenched fist that is raised against God. It is this rebellion which is now native to all human nature from its inception. In America today, though, only 17% define sin in relation to God. The sense that God stands over against us, that there are any habits, practices, or beliefs of which he disapproves, has left us and so has our understanding of sin. Indeed even some prominent Christians, such as Robert Schuller, have come to think that we ought not to speak of sin because this kind of thinking hurts people's feelings and assaults their self-esteem. It is our lost moral compass that produces this fallacious understanding of human nature and it is this fallacious understanding which fuels and drives Eros spirituality. Our presumed innocence leads us to the assumption that the sacred is naturally, easily, and conveniently available to us, when we want it, and how we want it. The sacred is as available, as accessible, as the artifacts of capitalism which are displayed with such allure in the mall.⁵⁵ It is there for the taking and we can have it in an unmediated way.

This presumption is what has produced such miscalculation, such blindness, for it is assuming that moral reality, and God himself,

53. George Barna, "Americans Draw Theological Beliefs from Diverse Points of View."

54. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 65.

55. Mark Ellingsen has argued that what is at work here is the old Enlightenment optimism which was recast into the old liberal Protestant theology. The common presumption was that people are good and they "know what they need, and their instincts about truth are accurate and good. Only sinners need the binding authority of the religious community's authoritative teachings to get them on the right path. The good person already has a vision of the right way to go. Select religious teachings are merely a vehicle for supplementing generally sound life instincts." *Blessed Are the Cynical: How Original Sin Can Make America a Better Place* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 122.

The apostles were sent to find those who were lost, and to bring sight to those who did not see, and healing to the sick, so they did not speak to them in accordance with their previous opinions but by manifestation of the truth. For no men of any kind would be acting rightly if they told blind men who were already beginning to fall over the precipice to continue in their dangerous way, as if it were a sound one and as if they would come through all right. What doctor, when wishing to cure a sick man, would act in accordance with the desires of the patient, and not in accordance with the requirements of medicine? . . . How, then, are the sick to be made strong? and how are sinners to repent? Is it by persevering as they are? or on the contrary, by undergoing a great change and reversal of their previous behavior, by which they have brought themselves serious illness, and many sins? Ignorance, the mother of these things, is driven out by knowing the truth. Therefore the Lord imparted knowledge of the truth to his disciples, by which he cured those who were suffering, and restrained sinners from sin. So he did not speak to them in accordance with their previous ideas, nor answer in accordance with the presumption of the inquirers, but in accordance with sound teaching, without any pretense or respect of persons.

Irenaeus, "Against Heresies"

are not objective and dangerous to us. God is at our convenience because he is accessible on our own terms. In this understanding, there is evil in the world but no sin. Sin is the breach with the divine order, the fist of rebellion shaken at God. Evil, on this postmodern understanding, is simply something lacking between ourselves and the sacred and it is something which can be overcome. The gap can be closed.

The reality, however, is that God stands over against us. To know him is not the same thing as knowing ourselves. This is the fatal principle of all paganism, that the divine and the human are part and parcel of each other, that there is no absolute barrier between God and the creature, that the sacred is found in the self. It is this presumption

which produces skewed sight. For if we think of sin as spiritual rebellion, and if we think of God as being a spirit who is resident within human nature, then sin cannot be comprehended because in its spirituality it is indistinguishable from the spirituality of God who is within. The one is part of the other. That is why the Greek philosophers thought about the corruptions in life as being rooted in the senses, in the body, for that at least is something other than the spirit, something which could be objectified and pondered. That, of course, easily leads on to various forms of asceticism as a means of taming the source of corruption. This was the path followed later in Catholic piety and was especially evident in monasticism. It is a path, however, that would be incomprehensible in a culture as sensate, as hedonistic, and as intolerant of limits and controls as is ours. In fact, all forms of asceticism have become blasphemies. What is therefore preferable by far is not to objectify our corruptions, not to locate them anywhere, but to merge them into everything spiritual and to think that God is simply our constant companion, the quiet, accepting presence within the self, and one who sees no evil and hears no evil and from whom there is no alienation.

Public, Not Private

It is quite apparent that the new spirituality is practicing what has become one of the norms of the postmodern world — that is, the belief that each person must be allowed one's own private space within which one has the freedom to define reality for oneself and set one's own rules. Violating this private space is, socially speaking, intolerable. This habit, of course, is an expression of how our postmodern relativism is working itself out in this highly individualistic culture. But it is also speaking to the matter of truth. Truth in this postmodern and individualistic context becomes entirely private. What is true for one, therefore, may not be true for another; what is preference for one will not be preference for another, and the spirituality that works for this person may not work for that. And while this state of affairs bears all the marks of postmodern behaving and believing, it also makes a connection with the paganism of an earlier time when it was also thought

that human nature yielded up intimations of "truth" about the supernatural world. And this habit was confronted by the biblical prophets who, in effect, declared that truth was to be thought of as having been revealed in the public domain rather than emerging from within.

Truth, as I have suggested, is what corresponds to reality. It is the faithful and accurate representation of what is "out there," be this in the character and counsels of God, in the created world that he has made, or in the human heart as it has become.⁵⁶ To know the truth is to know what is there, to know it in a way that corresponds to what is there. And biblical truth was given publicly, within the framework of redemptive history, and the consequence was that the revelation thus given was as public, as unchangeable, and as objective as the events to which it was tied and through which it had come. It was truth that, because it was public, unchanging, and revealed by God, was universal in its reach. This kind of understanding allows no place for the locus of truth to be private in a postmodern sense, truth for one person being different from truth for another. This kind of radical, postmodern relativism not only pervades American society but it has also become the majority perception in the evangelical Church. "Truth" thus becomes nothing more than a private perception, and credence is given to this perception because in its believing there is supposedly some therapeutic benefit. This capitulation to a postmodern disposition is, in fact, a capitulation to what is quite close to a pagan habit, one that the Old Testament confronted directly.

G. Ernest Wright, some years ago, made this case quite convincingly although, along the way, he unfortunately also jeopardized the historic understanding of biblical authority by disengaging God's speaking from his acting. He did, however, see that while paganism in its various forms was a religion of *nature*, biblical faith arose in the context of *history*, the redemptive history in which God disclosed his character and saving purposes. This distinction between nature and history is, of course, a distinction between the locus of natural and supernatural revelation. God has disclosed himself in the creation but it is not a

56. See the discussion of the postmodern challenge to the correspondence view of truth in Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 111-38.

saving disclosure. Because the creation is finite and separate from the Creator, it has to be preserved and sustained in its life by him; otherwise it will collapse back into nothingness. And in this preserving work, God gives us a "witness" (Acts 14:17) and an occasion to "seek" him (Acts 17:27), and he also reveals his beauty (Ps. 19) and moral nature (Rom. 1:18-20). Nature by itself, however, yields only natural revelation, not supernatural.

This distinction between nature and history is not an absolute one in paganism, either. In the nature religions of paganism, the gods and goddesses were believed to intervene in life, sometimes leaving behind calamities, reverses and ravages. Yet in none of the pagan religions of the biblical period was there any interest in, or place for, this kind of history as a means of supernatural disclosure, as a place where the intentions of the gods could be discerned. The gods and goddesses may have acted out their caprices in history but those acts were always uninterpreted and therefore mute. Those events were not at the center of pagan interest. Instead, they worshipped the forces of nature and saw themselves as living in a complex hierarchy in which the rhythms of nature, its seasons of dying and regeneration, were part and parcel of the supernatural world. Theirs was a pantheistic understanding of nature. And the disclosure of the intentions of the gods and goddesses was accessed intuitively, not historically. In consequence, the pagan, Wright said, is "an individualist who uses the elaborate means of worship solely for the purpose of gaining his own security, integration and safety,"⁵⁷ a description that also fits postmodern spiritual searchers thousands of years later.

The biblical writers broke decisively with this. Nature is simply nature, even if it is providentially sustained by God and does disclose the beauty of its maker. Nevertheless, it yields no saving revelation. But in history, in its flesh and bone, God has acted and done so in such a way that the facts of this history, prophetically interpreted, became the building stones of his special disclosure of himself.

This has proved to be a vexed matter theologically. By the time that the nineteenth century was dawning, at least, this embeddedness

57. G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM Press, 1964), 25.

of revelation in history had become a widespread problem in academia. If this revelation is to be accessed through conventional means of historical research and literary analysis, then religion seemed to be in danger of being taken captive to a purely human undertaking. God was to be discovered, it seemed, and discovered as we discover even the most ordinary facts about life. This perception appalled the neo-orthodox in the last century, and yet they were unable to preserve a stable consensus over their own alternative. Barth distinguished between the ordinary network of events which take place in the flow of time, what is normally thought of as history (*Historie*), and the sphere of God's saving "history" (*Geschichte*), which is not grasped by research but by faith. He did so to preserve the idea that Christianity is not about the sinner finding God but about God finding the sinner. Yet, in making this distinction, Barth insisted that although the one kind of history always took place within the other, saving history was not bonded to, was not accessible from, the actual cause-and-event history. This, he thought, was the roadblock that stood in the way of the sinner invading heaven and, by his or her own efforts, entering the presence of God.

Almost immediately, however, this solution began to fall apart. Bultmann, who had been an early ally of Barth's, moved off in a different direction. He also distinguished between the two types of history but then argued that the one took place apart from the other. The resurrection of Christ, for example, had nothing to do with the raising of Christ's body but everything to do with a raising of the believer's internal consciousness. This distinction between these two kinds of history, whether in the Barthian or Bultmannian forms, proved not to be durable. Both views were fraught with too many insurmountable difficulties. And while Pannenberg was right to reject this kind of distinction between different histories, his own proposal proved to be no more attractive. He abandoned the distinction between general history and that which is saving, thereby sliding into the old Hegelian view.⁵⁸

The way in which Scripture views this whole matter seems to be a little different from these solutions for it affirms that God's redemptive purposes are made known *within* the framework provided by real

58. For a wider discussion of these issues, see Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (6 vols.; Waco: Word, 1976-83), II, 247-334; V, 21-42.

events, events of a *bona fide* kind, of which he is the cause and the interpreter, within the life of his covenant people. It is these events which are remembered, rehearsed, and recited by the people of God (e.g. Ps. 78, 80, 114; Acts 7:1-53) even as they recognize God's wider providential role in the life of the other nations. These events became paradigmatic of how God would always act and, in this sense, he was always predictable insofar as he would always act in a way which was consistent with the ways that he had acted in the past. This stood in stark contrast to the pagan gods and goddesses who were frequently capricious. This was at the heart of Israel's faith, that God was faithful, not capricious or unreliable, that he was the God of promise whose promises never went unfulfilled. As Moses declared, God "keeps covenant" "to a thousand generations" (Deut. 7:9).

Of these acts, three were of particular importance: first, the call of Abraham, for the promise given to him (Gen. 12:2-3) was the explanation for the existence of the people of God; second, the Exodus, to which the prophets repeatedly pointed for it was this deliverance which had made of them a nation in covenant with God; third, the calling of David through whose victories God's people were established in the land. It was in the light of these events in particular, events in which God had made known truth about himself and his saving intentions, that Israel understood herself in the day-to-day circumstances of life.

Francis Foulkes has pointed out,⁵⁹ however, that while it is the case that God's acts in the past were prophetic of his acts in the future in that he always acted in a way that was consistent with what he had done in the past, in the prophets the hope also began to grow that in the future God would act in a way that was even more grand than had been the case in the past. As long as the people of God were surrounded by pagan nations and harassed, or were defeated, the promises made to Abraham and to David were not being fully realized. It was to an even more glorious future that the prophets therefore looked. And when we come to the New Testament, it is these acts of God which are seen as being reenacted through Christ in that even more glorious

59. Francis Foulkes, *The Acts of God: A Study of the Basis of Typology in the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale Press, 1958).

way. Moses, for example, had spoken of "a prophet," a new Moses, who was yet to come. It was this hope that was alive in Jesus' day (Jn. 1:21; 6:14; 7:40). And Hebrews speaks of Christ (Heb. 3:1-6) as being that new Moses, though one greater than he. Not only so, but in Christ the Exodus motif is also reenacted yet on an even greater scale, his people being liberated from the "Egypt" of sin (Hos. 7:16; 9:3; 11:5) for Christ the "Passover Lamb" has been slain (I Cor. 5:7). Likewise, God promised to David that his throne would be established forever (II Sam. 7:12). In the kings that followed, few came even close to being like David, few enjoyed such victories or blessings as had attended his reign, and so the hope began to grow, a hope nurtured by failure and disappointment, that God would yet act in the future in an even more glorious way (Jer. 23:5; Mic. 5:2; Is. 9:6-7). It is this hope which is seen as being realized in Christ (Matt. 2:6), David's son, whose reign will, indeed, not only be blessed but will also be eternal. It is this kind of pattern of the repetition of God's acts, yet on an even grander scale in the future, that is carried through in a number of additional themes such as the temple, covenant, and new creation.

It is sufficient here to note, however, that this framework of understanding the purposes of God was a framework rooted in the history in which he worked out his purposes. And these purposes were defined objectively by, and revealed unchangeably through, that history. It was thus that the prophets spoke of who God was by what he had done. Theirs was, therefore, a theology of remembrance, recitation, and hope built upon a revelation which God had given in which he disclosed truth about himself. It was this truth that always stood over against the people of God in the sense that it was not subject to change by their desires, perceptions, or inclinations.

This has large ramifications for us in the postmodern world. These acts, interpreted by God the Holy Spirit through the writers of Scripture, have a meaning which is objective to the contemporary interpreter for the acts of which the interpretation speaks are not subject to revision or change. They do not depend for their reality upon the response of the reader. Their meaning cannot be overridden by any postmodern, subjective disposition. They simply have to be understood in their own terms.

Here there can be no Eros spirituality, as if grace is reached as na-

ture extends its arms upward toward it! Not at all. Grace is known only as God acts to make himself known through his Word and Spirit.⁶⁰ It is only as the self-revealing God speaks again his ancient Word into the contemporary world that it is heard, only as the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit enters the recesses of a hearer's being that God's address as address is heard. Yet this hearing does not happen, as Barth thought, in a saving realm that parallels but is disconnected from the redemptive acts of Israel's history but, rather, it happens through and in connection with the acts within this narrative. Thus do we have, as Kevin Vanhoozer argues, God's "speech acts" in which are joined at a conceptual level God's acting, his acting in real history, and God's speaking, speaking through the words of Scripture in which the record of those acts is embedded.⁶¹

Revelation, then, is public, not private. It is public in the sense that God's primary locus of communication is not within the self nor are his intentions accessed by intuition. He has spoken, and he continues to speak, through the words of Scripture which constitute the Word of God. This revelation, however, is anchored by events within the redemptive narrative by which God called out to himself a people, led them, preserved them, judged them, and finally brought the promises he had made to them into final and full realization in Christ. This is a history which took place apart from human consciousness, and not within the human psyche, and though it has to be understood and interpreted, its meaning is always objective to the interpreter. It has to be understood solely on its own terms; Scripture, the Reformers said, is *sui ipsius interpres*. The Holy Spirit who inspired the Scripture is also its privileged interpreter, which means that the content of Scripture is not subject to being overridden by the interests of the interpreter, or those of a later culture, or those of an ecclesiastical tradition.

60. The Protestant principle has always been to see the biblical Word as the external form of authority which is respooken by the internal principle of the Holy Spirit. "In the matter of religious authority," Ramm wrote, "the Spirit and the Word are insolubly conjoined. The Scriptures function in the ministry of the Spirit, and the Spirit functions in the instrument of the Word. In this vital relationship of Spirit and Scripture the Reformers grounded their doctrine of religious authority." Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Authority* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1957), 29.

61. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 127-203.

To the Church, therefore, God has given his Word, his Word of truth. When God the Holy Spirit acts in his illuminating role, he enters the sacrosanct spaces in which postmoderns hide themselves and in which they define their own reality. God respects no sacred spaces other than the ones he is filling, for what we have been considering in this discussion of postmodern individualism and relativism, this postmodern construction of a sacred reality that reflects postmodern sensibilities, is nothing less than the contemporary version of a very ancient idolatry. Since God brooks no rivals, he respects no self-constructed sacred spaces. These are spaces in which the sinner declares his or her own sovereignty and, in projecting human want and need into eternity, is, in that very act, seeking to control eternity, to have it on his or her own terms. Eros spirituality, however, dies in the presence of God's Word because biblical truth destroys the sinner's sovereignty which is at the heart of this kind of spirituality.

Agape spirituality and Eros spirituality, therefore, are not variations upon a common theme but stark alternatives. In the one, God reaches down in his grace; in the other, the sinner reaches up in self-sufficiency. Not only are they entirely different in their structures and motivations but God's reaching down into someone's life actually excludes the possibility of that person reaching up. There is no possibility of a synergism here, of God's grace in Agape cooperating with the human desire of Eros. These spiritualities belong in two entirely different worlds. God's sovereignty exercised in the one excludes the humanly seized sovereignty exercised in the other. His grace is grace only when it does what no human effort or desire can do.

Personal, Not Impersonal

Christian faith, then, is about listening, listening to the Word of God. Eros spirituality is about speaking. It speaks because there is no one to whom it can listen. There is no address from outside the human situation because there is no one who is speaking or who has spoken into it. However, the truth is that it is impossible to speak *from* the human situation to God. If God has not first spoken of himself, there can be no authentic human speaking of him because that speaking reveals only

human longing and intuition. There is, then, no actual speaking about God and the only listening in Eros spirituality is the one in which all that is heard is its own yearnings reverberating around the self.

The difference, then, between an Agape faith and an Eros spirituality, between the God who reaches down in grace and the human creature who reaches up in self-sufficiency, is that in the one case there is address and in the other case only yearning, in the one a summons and in the other only a sigh. In the end, these are two different worlds, for the one is personal and the other is not; in the one God, who cannot be less personal than the human beings he has made, is encountered and in the other he is not. In the other, there is only a seemingly infinite ocean, an ocean in which human personality becomes lost in all of that ocean's immensity. And in the absence of a divine and personal summons through the Word of God there is only the impersonal vortex that threatens to absorb everything into one undifferentiated mass.

To the Church, then, has been given the charge of proclaiming the Word of God. This revelatory Word is not a concatenation of human opinions and ideas but rather is God's own proclamation, the very means by which he speaks, even into postmodern society. It is, therefore, the making possible of what would be entirely impossible without the grace of God and the powerful working of the Spirit through whose work, and despite the stammering and faltering lips of the preacher, is heard once again the divine summons to stand before God and hear his Word. Here is hope. We have not been cast adrift upon that infinite ocean but, rather, we find ourselves in a universe not of our own making where all of our best thoughts of God are swept away as upon a ferocious current only to be replaced by the eternally simple speech of the triune God. He draws near through his Word, he lifts the fallen, he feeds the hungry, he corrects the wandering, he rebukes the self-sufficient, and everywhere there is found the sweet fragrance of his grace where he has spoken through his Word and ministered by his Spirit.

CHAPTER V

Christ in a Meaningless World

We desire truth and find in ourselves nothing but uncertainty. We seek happiness and find only wretchedness and death. We are incapable of not desiring truth and happiness and incapable of either certainty or happiness.

BLAISE PASCAL

Postmoderns are remarkably nonchalant about the meaninglessness which they experience in life. Reading the works of an earlier generation of writers, existentialist authors like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, one almost developed a sense of vertigo, the kind of apprehension that one gets when standing too near the edge of a terrifying precipice, so bleak, empty, and life-threatening was their vision. That sense, however, has now completely gone. Postmoderns live on the surface, not in the depths, and theirs is a despair to be tossed off lightly and which might even be alleviated by nothing more serious than a sitcom. There are today few of the convulsions that once happened in the depths of the human spirit. These are different responses to the same sense of meaninglessness which is one of the threads that weaves its way from the modern past into the postmodern present. What changes is simply how those afflicted with the drift and empti-