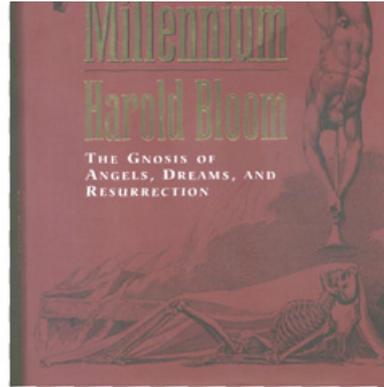


Essay Review by Lee Irwin
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In an earlier work (*The American Religion*, 1992), Harold Bloom posited the pervasive existence of an underground "gnosticism" as a defining characteristic of American religions. Describing himself as a "Jewish Gnostic" (and Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale and Berg Professor of English at New York University), in this work Bloom further pursues his thesis that contemporary interests in angelology, dreams, near-death experience, and the approaching millennium are rooted in a pervasive American gnostic outlook. While I cannot agree with Bentley Layton that this work is a "dazzling account of the Gnostic, Jewish, and Islamic roots of American religion" I would agree that it is a remarkable summary of influences that have left deep impressions on the collective American psyche. Bloom sees the fascination for the occult and "uncanny" as rooted in ancient streams of early Christian Hermetic Gnosticism, Sufi Theosophy, and Jewish Kabbalah. Citing William James, Bloom emphasizes the importance of religious experience as central to a widespread American search for the presence of divinity within the everyday world, juxtaposed to secular, intellectual aestheticism. Much of the book focuses on what Bloom calls the "angelic realm" intermediate between the material and the intellectual, a *Mundus Imaginalis* in which powerful psychic dramas are enacted as a reflection of soulful longing for visionary encounters.

Bloom gives an ideosyncratic history of gnosticism preceding its American incarnation, tracking from ancient Egypt through Zoroastrianism to Greek and Hebrew religious thinking, synthesized in early "gnostic" Christianity, and spun out in the classic Hermetic texts, strongly influencing Greek Neoplatonism, Merakabah mysticism, and Iranian Sufism. These currently were then turbulently united in Renaissance revivalism and passed on through European ecstatic preachers and esotericists to America. He focuses on Zoroastrian dualism as the prophetic origin of all later Euro-



dead and the male and female archangelic forms of revelation. He defines gnosticism as "direct acquaintance of God within the self" (p. 10) and repudiates the concept of the "collective unconscious." Citing the French esoteric scholar Henry Corbin, he sees the angelic realm as a "suprasensible world" in which images (not ideas) reign as well as angels, dreams, and "astral-body" experiences. This is the realm he wants to explore, tracing out esoteric roots and connections to past visionary cultures and showing how this intermediate realm is a highly active and a vital feature of American spirituality. At 65, Bloom feels free to write fast and loose, without references or much supporting evidence for his many generalized claims, citing source in a catch as can way, which weakens his presentation. However, I found the book fascinating and challenging, as I followed the author through thicket and hedge in search of a meaningful explanation of American occult interests.

Bloom's strategy is to relocate the nexus of spiritual growth and development in the "self" and not in any institutionalized, dogmatic religion, an attitude he claims is reflected by popular interests in the paranormal and the apocalyptic. While "Bloom does not wish to worship Bloom" (p. 17), he repudiates the superficial self-interests of much New Age spirituality which he sees as a mix of "occultism and American harmonial faith suspended about half way between feeling good and good feeling" (p. 19). The search for transcendence as he sees it requires the seeker to move beyond both the material universe and the empirical, everyday self into the indwelling divine source of immortality. This is not a matter of faith but of knowledge (gnosis), of knowing and of being known, of seeing the divine spark within, even in the fallen condition of incarnate life. He strongly emphasizes this element of the "estrangement or even alienation of God" (p. 27) who abandons the cosmos while leaving the spark of divinity in every person. For Bloom, gnosticism arises as a "protest" against failed apocalypticism, as a consequence of resistance to the ever-turning wheel of historical becoming. He notes the Brethren of the Free Spirit, the Carthars, and the Manichaeans as three similar gnostic protest movements, particularly among the elite where he locates many of the currents of contemporary American gnosticism, degraded in popular occult interests. Angel lore, near death accounts, out-of-body experiences are all signs of the implicit gnosticism that underlies the surfacing millennial fever.

Bloom then tackles angels, first by dismissing much of what is written as superficial, holding up Milton's Satan as a great

archetypal figure followed by a declining humanization in Boehme and Swedenborg, a banalization resulting in domesticated, sentimentalized angel "helpers" and "guides" far removed from their original, awesome, revelatory origins. He takes Metatron (Ezekiel 1:26-28) as the archetypal, supernal Adam of Jewish gnosticism and traces angel imagery through 1 and 3 Enoch into Merkabah mysticism. Making a series of leaps, he then compares Metatron with the Iranian Sufi "Man of Light" (Corbin, 1951), the Qur'anic figure of Idris, and the Greek Hermes as "perfect nature" uniting man and divinity (p. 49). Such leaps are typical and sweep the reader long in a turbulent stream of heady prose compressing centuries into a few dramatic paragraphs. After leaping forth and back between Aquinian angelic hierarchies, their Pseudo-Dionysian origins, the writings of St Ambrose, the Hebrew bible, the fall of angels led by Lucifer, and New Testament creation of Satan as the rebel archetype via Augustine, Bloom concludes that true angelic revelations are today rare. A contemporary angelic revelation shows "belief in false miracles, and is an offense against God" (p. 73); only Joseph Smith is held up as an exemplary of true angelic revelation. He then posits a contemporary gnostic standard for evaluating angelic appearances: their archetypal revelatory appearances in Hermetic, Sufi, and Kabbalist traditions in contrast to New Age angels based on "wish fulfillment". Bloom contends that the awesome "otherness" of the angel must stand as an indication of authentic gnosis, of the undeniable mark of the terrifying potency of the divine hierarchy.

In discussing dreams, Bloom harkens to the role of dreams in the Kabbalah (Isaac Luria and 16th c. Safed) and the presence of angels as revealers and interpreters of dreams. Yet, dreams as discussed in the Babylonian Talmud were seen as ambiguous, both revelatory and misleading, a kind of minor prophecy mixed with "worthless things" that depended on diverse interpretations for understanding. Bloom reads dreams as primarily devalued and mistrusted in mainstream Judaism and Christianity, epitomized by Freud's hermeneutic suspicions. Yet, within western esoteric traditions, the dream could be revelatory, divine epiphanies opening to the suprasensual world. For Bloom, dreams can give "intimations of immortality" (p. 98) and may well overlap and be shared among multiple dreamers. Then, unexpectedly, we meet a diversion: Bloom's analysis of Freudian dream theory which he takes pains to refute, dragging in Wittgenstein to counter

"free association" and Richard Wollheim to dismember Freud's neurotic symptomology of dreams. Sufism and Kabbalah provide Bloom with a means for recovering the value of dreams in post-Freudian, psychobiological America; he sees the Kabbalist Shekhinah, a Sophianic, indwelling divine female presence, or alternatively the Angel Christ,

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as primal sources of revelatory, prophetic dreams imaged as "the man or woman of all light" (p. 122). Freud's bondage to the past, to childhood and trauma, is overturned in the gnostic paradigm to a visionary future of cosmological growth and development, a turn that Bloom sees as a liberation of the spiritual imagination.

In discussing life-after-death and astral or out-of-body experience, Bloom is a bit too caustic and in some ways, superficial. One distraction in his work is a tendency to satirize and denounce what he disagrees with or thinks is just plain nonsense. I don't dispute his right to not believe any number of things, but I found his sporadic satire distracting. Dismissing Raymond Moody (and Kenneth Ring) and holding up his own Cocteau-like near-death-experience as undercutting Moody's (strictly theoretical) stages, Bloom turns to "shamanism" as a more reliable source for understanding the gnostic element in modern out-of-body experience. Relying heavily on Dodds' (1951) classic work on Greek irrationalism, Bloom presses the reader to distinguish between soul (*psyche*) and the "occult self" (*pneuma* or *daemon*). This occult-self is "older than the body" and should not be confused with the more astral, bodily image of a present incarnation. Equating shamanic ecstatic trance (via Eliade) with true gnosis, he argues that the gnostic Jesus is really a shaman (p. 140). In this context, contemporary near-death experiences become parodies of "authentic shamanism" because they lack knowledge of the innate divinity or "occult self". Ironically, Bloom seems completely unaware of the post-Dodds literature on shamanism which has strongly discredited Eliade and attacked Anglocentric definitions of shamanism as wholly inadequate representations of indigenous spirituality (see Daniel Noel, *The Soul of Shamanism*, 1997). Here Bloom is simply recasting his argument in terms of compatible non-indigenous thinking while ignoring the actual phenomenological reports of out-of-body experience. I agree that commercialization has sentimentalized and glossed over actual experience but the shamanic analogy is much too simplistic and highly problematic.

His overview of the Sufi "subtle body," which he equates with the "resurrection body," is

much more original and central to his concerns. Every soul has an inner image, often personified as a "being of light," which acts to epitomize his or her highest spiritual potential (the angelic self). Often mistaken as a "guardian angel," this visionary image is a reflection of the "inner essence" sought by the gnostic. The task is to empty the everyday self in order to absorb that angelic self; this celestial prototype is the basis of gnostic revelation and the

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gnostic or angelic Christ (or feminine Shekhinah) appears variously, according to the merits of the seeker. What matters is the resurrected (not crucified) Christ, who "appears as a man to men and an angel to angels" (p. 163). Like a grain of wheat sown in the body, the visionary image is a source of spiritual knowledge and resurrection, a knowing that can grow into a presence of divinity within. The imaginal world is where we create the means for the fruition of this seed as a "rose among thorns" (Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, 1980). Bloom also calls this the "body of love" found occasionally in great poetry or other visionary literature of the secular west. The "astral" body remains a lower vehicle, a New Age media, as distinct from the "angelic" image which is the primal source of gnostic revelation as found in various mystic, esoteric schools. This section (and the next) is the heart of the book and summarizes many of Bloom's best ideas and primary gnostic concerns.

Bloom then reviews Gnosticism as articulated in the Hermetic-gnostic texts, ranging from the Egyptian Hermes (using Garth Fowden's *The Egyptian Hermes*, 1986) through the Corpus Hermeticum (Brian Copenhaven, 1992) and the Valentinian paradigm as articulated by Hans Jonas, Peter Brown, and Bentley Layton, including later Christian and Sufi analogues. From Bloom's perspective, the failed Jewish apocalyptic writers influenced or perhaps "became Gnostics," making gnosticism a possible "Jewish heresy rather than a Christian one" (p. 186). He reads the core of Christian gnosticism as knowing how to release the inner spark, to recover knowledge of the divine Fullness, and to leave behind the fallen material world. The body goes to dust, the soul survives, and the spark returns to primal divine origin; the true self is this spark, the sought after source of all gnostic illumination. Such an illumination, produced by dying to the world, leads likewise to the Sufi "world of light" over which Sophia-Fatima (or Shekhinah) is the presiding archangel, yet another image of inward divinity. The Kabbalah offers a similar image in Metatron, analogue of the Greek

Hermes and Egyptian Thoth, who shows Moses the way to the divine throne and who is nothing less than God in angelic form, imaging the divine self. Passing through the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, Bloom demonstrates this same analogy: the withdrawing of divinity leaving only divine sparks which provide a means for a return to the most primordial source of all gnostic revelations.

Finally, we arrive at the American millennium and an estimated hundred million Americans expecting the return of Christ. Bloom predicts an unrealized apocalyptic expectation will only strengthen

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the turn toward the inner gnostic self. "Failed prophecy becomes apocalyptic and failed apocalyptic becomes Gnosticism" (p. 225). This is the core thesis of the book. The authentic "omens" of the millennium are found in dreams and visions of a supernal guardian angel and in a personal gnostic resurrection which is a veiled intimation for rebirth and recovery of inward divinity. In recovering an authentic, visionary imagination, the glossy images of sentimental angelic lore or superficial soul-travel can be transmuted into a potent source of gnosis, in keeping with what Bloom sees as a two hundred year gnostic current in American religions. Bloom ends with a "Gnostic Sermon" that argues for a genuinely gnostic way of life in which "knowing God" is a reciprocal process of self-awakening freeing the gnostic from all religious and institutional dogmatism. This requires considerably more than psychological analysis; it requires a recovery of an ancient inward identity still viable and powerful in the present, a Fullness and vital peace masked "by psyche or soul, the swallower of our deeper self" (p. 243). Such gnosticism can be Pagan, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or "eastern" and follows a resurrectionist celebration of Christ as the angel of revelation.

There are certain counter points that can be raised in contrast to Bloom's rather classical views of gnosticism. Gnosticism need not be world-denying nor anti-incarnational, nor does the inherent divinity of humanity need stem from an alienated god. The very concept of anything approaching a coherent, shared view of gnosticism has been repeatedly criticized by many scholars of religion (particularly in Michael Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, 1996). In fact, gnosticism may be thought of as variable semantic reference to a wide diversity of orientations, not all world renouncing or socially elitist. In the American context, it seems far more likely that the gnostic strain will become increasingly aesthetic and

embodied along panpsychic lines of religious practices reclaiming intimacy and concern for the natural world without in any way diluting its appeal to direct religious experience.

Further, Bloom's view of angels is thoroughly romantic and saturated with literary references that tend to overwrite entirely any phenomenology of angelic encounter, as is his general dismissal of out-of-body experience which is far more complex and diverse than the now dated Moody materials. Additionally, the gnostic stream of some New Age spirituality is much more sophisticated than the parody that Bloom gives as normative. The tie between western esotericism and much thought and practice in contemporary non-traditional American spirituality has long been engaged with the very materials that Bloom reviews in his book (see Wouter Hanegraff's *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 1998). However, I found this book very stimulating

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and rewarding, imaginatively written and insightful. While the history was hit-and-miss, the primary thesis linking apocalyptic and gnostic strands of spirituality is very cogent and deserves deeper reflection and dialogue.

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