

WITHOUT AMBASSADOR—OR DIPLOMACY

THE AMERICAN RELIGION

The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation

Harold Bloom

Simon and Schuster, \$22, 247 pp.

Edward T. Oakes

Cardinal Newman once said, famously, that the church of the fourth century woke up one day and discovered it was Arian. Harold Bloom, Yale's renowned literary critic, claims in his latest book that Americans too will wake up one day and discover, not that they are Arians, but Gnostics.

Now, "Gnosticism" is a notoriously protean term that covers a wide range of reli-

gions and worldviews. But what all the manifestations of Gnosticism have in common are two traits: a spirit-matter dualism, and a belief that the human spirit belongs by nature and right to the divine spirit. Indeed for Gnosticism the human spirit has always been an essential aspect of the Godhead that somehow fell into the world of matter, there to remain alienated from its true home until death brings release. The Gnostics of the second century were fond of invoking a telling metaphor for this sense of entrapment: the soul is in the body, they said, as gold is embedded in the mud. Not only is there no essential connection between soul and body, but the former is precious beyond compare while the latter is vile and dirty.

Now at first blush nothing would seem to be more alien to the American ethos

than such a repugnance to the body, especially after forty years of Hugh Hefner and the cult of the young body. But Bloom is too shrewd to stop at these surfaces. For him the essential trait of the Gnostic motif is not matter-spirit dualism but the assertion of the direct and essential connection between the human and divine spirits. For the Gnostic, God and the human spirit are so ontically fused to one another that self-knowledge is, by definition, equivalent to a knowledge of God ("gnosis" in fact means knowledge in Greek; Gnostics got their name from insisting that the connection between God and the soul was so direct that faith was superfluous, as there was no real gap to cross in the darkness of trust).

Late in the book Bloom quotes Emerson's line that "it is by yourself *without ambassador* that God speaks to you....It is God in you that responds to God without." Here we see the essentially Gnostic moment in the American ethos. Indeed Bloom could well have gone on to quote the poem "Good-bye," which shows more clearly than any other work of Emerson's how Gnosticism's unmediated relation to God will inevitably lead to an alienation from matter and the world of creation as well:

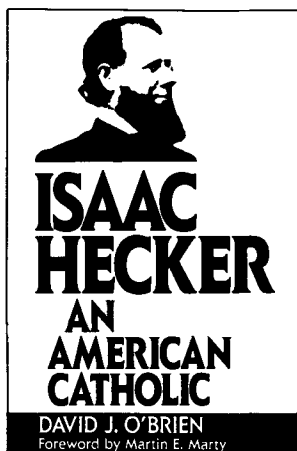
Good-bye, proud world! I'm going home;

Thou art not my friend, and I'm not thine.

As a critic, Bloom has always been intoxicated by the American Transcendentalists, Emerson and Whitman in particular; and this intense familiarity with their work has given him an astonishingly acute vision, enabling him to see the implicitly Gnostic motivation of so many of our home-grown religions, Christian Science, Mormonism, Southern Baptism, Pentecostalism and the New Age movement:

In perfect solitude, the American spirit learns again its absolute isolation as a spark of God floating in a sea of space. What is around it has been created by God, but the spirit is as old as God is, and so is no part of God's creation....Something in the American self is persuaded that it also preceded the created world. The freedom assured by the American Religion is not what

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Protestants once called Christian Liberty, but is a solitude in which the inner loneliness is at home in an outer loneliness.

As perhaps these citations already indicate, I found this an amazing book: dazzling in its insights, provocative in its thesis, and often very, very funny in its observations. Not since D.H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* have I read a work on American civilization so penetrating and so exciting. Henceforth, the burden of proof will lie with the opposition, with those who deny the Gnosticism of our home-grown religions or the inner pathos that has given them birth:

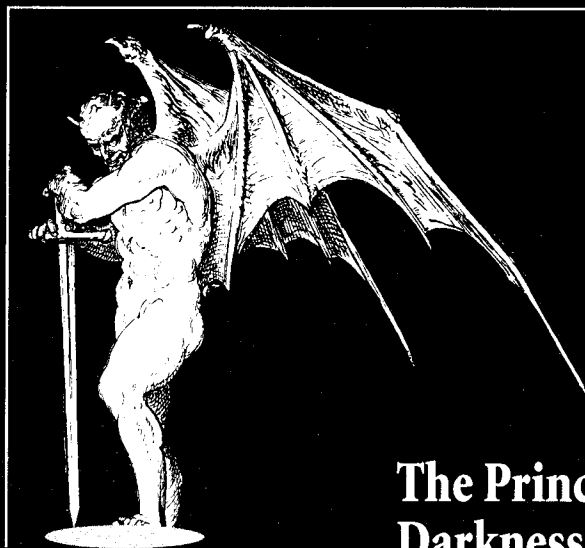
Unlike most countries, we have no overt national religion; but a partly concealed one has been developing among us for some two centuries now. It is almost purely experiential, and despite its insistences, it is scarcely Christian in any traditional way. A religion of the self burgeons, under many names, and seeks to know its own inwardness, in isolation. What the American self has found, since about 1800, is its own freedom—from the world, from time, from other selves. But this freedom is a very expensive torso, because of what it is obliged to leave out: society, temporality, the other. What remains, for it, is solitude and the abyss.

Despite the undoubted brilliance of this book, however, the reader should be warned that an eccentricity runs through Bloom's entire analysis, one that threatens to undermine what he has tried so effectively to demonstrate. This same eccentricity totally vitiated the thesis of his *The Book of J* (which claimed not only that parts of the Pentateuch were written by a woman but, more crucially, by a proto-novelist whose God was little more than a literary trope). But nothing daunted, Bloom has emerged from the attacks on *J* with the same sensibility intact. He still insists that Gnosticism is, if not true, at least a much more plausible alternative for us than the classical Judaism or Christianity of the canonical Bible. Claiming to be a "Gnostic without hope," Bloom insists throughout the book that

he is not so much criticizing the American Religion as celebrating it.

But this simply is not true. The reader simply cannot take these frequent protestations seriously, ("this may seem like an unsympathetic account, but that is certainly not my intention"); in every chapter Bloom proceeds to fillet one more branch of the American Religion—so severely, in fact, that they all begin to resemble merely different varieties of the fishmonger's salmon. His dissection of Matthew Fox's creation spirituality is particularly

withering (so much so that Cardinal Ratzinger could certainly afford to lift the Vatican penalties against him, as there will be little left of Fox's reputation after the appearance of this book). But I cite Bloom's severity for wider reasons: his treatment of Fox is but the most devastating example of his general method, for all the other "founders" of American religions such as Mary Baker Eddy or Joseph Smith come under a similar indictment, if rarely so scathingly put. And if Bloom's readers were in any doubt about his real



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attitude toward our home-grown religions, they need merely consult the last chapter, "So Great a Cloud of Witnesses," where the author examines the tacit political alliance that binds all of the adherents of the American Religion together (however divergent their theologies might *seem*) into the Republican party: "President Bush waves the flag and the fetus, and we are returned to some of the darker consequences of the Gnostic stance of the religion of our climate."

In my judgment, *The American Religion* is fundamentally a locale for a uniquely Bloomian theomachy, where the divine ghosts of Emerson and H.L. Mencken can be glimpsed fighting it out while the author tries to make up his mind between them—and by the end of the book Mencken has clearly won the palm of victory. The more the book progresses, the more obvious becomes the sneer for the "booboisie," and for any variety of politics that does not pass muster with the Mandarinate of the liberal elites. Occasionally, but only occasionally, Bloom will admit that the academic pooh-bahs in our university humanities departments are as Gnostic as the religions he puts under his critical microscope ("Networking in our America, these days, takes place either among the politically correct cranks of the high camp of resentment, or among the dank cranks of the belated Aquarian conspiracy, trying to float our planet off into cosmic consciousness"), but this insight gets him nowhere because of his deep ambivalence toward Gnosticism to begin with.

It is this ambivalence that brings the book to the very cliff's edge of failure (only its brilliant perspicuity saves it from falling right over into the abyss it so well depicts). By conviction and sensibility, Bloom cannot appreciate, but only note, the Barthian and Augustinian alternative that classical Christianity can pose to American Gnosticism. But so unsympathetic is he to this alternative that he cannot see the opportunities in America posed by the last representative of biblical Christianity that still has any institutional strength left: the Catholic church. (Bloom does however note, most interestingly, that if the rule of celibacy were relaxed there would be nothing to stop the American Catholic church

from being co-opted by American Gnosticism.)

One is therefore left with an odd mixture of feelings upon completing this fascinating book: exhilaration at its insights mixed with regret for its missed opportunities; excitement at the debate it will

provoke mixed with dread at the course the debate will take; admiration for the brilliance of the author mixed with a sadness at his plight. When he describes himself as "a Gnostic without hope," Bloom has said more than he can possibly imagine. □

AN OSSUARY OF A NOVEL

VERY OLD BONES

William Kennedy
Viking, \$22, 255 pp.

Paul Elie

They say William Kennedy put Albany on the literary map. Because I grew up near Albany, the city has always been on my map, so I've dutifully read the novels in Kennedy's Albany cycle and followed their reception in the press. Critics invariably compare Kennedy's Albany to Joyce's Dublin and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, diligently connecting the dots from book to book to build their case that Kennedy has made transcendent the city where I used to go hear punk bands called Capitle! and the Lumpen Proles and Fear of Strangers.

But the discussion of the novels as installments in a cycle about Albany and the Phelan family has distracted people from the task of judging them as individual works. And the difficulty of doing so pressed upon me as I read the miscellany that is *Very Old Bones*. Kennedy's sixth novel has the hardscrabble wit, verbal grace, and classicism of all of his work, and yet it points up the liabilities of an artistic method that consists of leaving stories partly told, narrative strands willfully undone.

The novel is ostensibly a memoir written by Orson Purcell, who, with typically playful self-consciousness, describes himself as a "precocious scholar, sometime newsman, editor of books, working on a book of my own, and on top of it all, a line officer

in the big war, what a guy." Born in Greenwich Village, the illegitimate son of artist Peter Phelan and onetime showgirl Claire Purcell, Orson might have become the first of the Phelans not to be fettered by home and family and religion. As a young man he spends the postwar period in the Army in Germany, devising shady schemes and wooing and marrying the Frenchwoman Giselle, a glamorous aspiring photographer. Later he decamps in New York, scamming still, taking Giselle on a second honeymoon of sorts at the Plaza Hotel, and "expanding the jots and

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