

Do Adventists Cast A Gnostic Shadow?

Two widely noted authors see Adventists as a people seeking special knowledge that is typically American.

by Karl Hall

ANYONE WHO HAS STRAINED AT JUSTIFYING the ways of God to humanity eventually confronts the temptation of Gnosticism. “Gnosticism” is the post hoc label given to an influential set of heresies that helped constitute early church doctrine in the centuries following Christ’s death. That one would be hard pressed to employ it as a topic of conversation in our own day is in part a testimony to orthodoxy’s subsequent success in defining its own authority. Yet modern America’s sense of its own exceptional place in history has also made it fertile ground for latter-day religious convictions that answer to the appeal of Gnosticism.

While the assertion that Gnosticism now pervades certain American subcultures would

excite little remark from religious historians or sociologists of religion, few of us are well attuned either to the social needs it addresses or to its historical influence on our own lives. The insistent question of the Gnostics to the early church—*Unde malum?* (Whence comes evil?)—sparked many of the original doctrinal controversies about the place of evil in a loving God’s creation, and about the humanity of the divine Logos. When we rebel at the absolute distance between an omnipotent God and mortal humans, Gnostic systems hold out the possibility of redeeming ourselves through special knowledge. Their systems of cosmic redemption offer a reconciliation of these tensions, both by placing an essential part of us outside the Creation, and by making redemption our own to achieve as much as it is Christ’s. As one Gnostic teacher counseled, “Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of a similar sort. Look for him by taking yourself as the starting point.”

If Seventh-day Adventists are inclined to dismiss these sentiments as more relevant to

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the karmic prattlings of New Age gurus than to our own belief and practice, then we would do well to examine two recent books, which provide intriguing insights into the relationship of Adventism to the Gnostic elements that have found such resonance in modern America. In the first, we encounter the earnest appraisals of a “religious critic” who reminds us of our own historical participation in the Gnosticism of 19th-century American religion-making, and candidly points out our ambiguous relationship to those currents today. In the second, we find a clever fictional evocation of a sometime Adventist institution in which the health message was extended into a gospel of human perfectibility. Each book in its own way cautions against confusing the *credo* with any form of self-asserted knowledge that promises transcendence, whether of mortal bodies or the Creation or the community of faith.

The American Religion by Harold Bloom

In *The American Religion* the prolific literary critic Harold Bloom has attempted an exercise in what he calls “religious criticism.” The central burden for religious criticism is “to build bridges across gaps, to explain in particular the very curious relations that generally prevail between theology and actual religious experience, in whatever faith.” Bloom contends that religious criticism “must seek for the irreducibly *spiritual* dimension in religious matters,” much as (he thinks) literary criticism searches for the aesthetic in works of literature. A self-proclaimed Jewish “Gnostic without hope,” Bloom certainly realizes he will be met with skepticism. Declaring the standard of value for the judgments in his book to be the religious imagination, he still does not hesitate to suggest that by this standard the deepest implications of the American Religion may be judged an “imaginative triumph.”

For Bloom, the central features of the American Religion are the freedom and solitude which the American claims in communion with God or with Jesus. The soul, or rather the “spark” or pneuma of the occult self—that best and oldest part of us that predates the Creation—can commune freely with a solitary God of freedom because it has in some sense always been one with God. The American sense that we are “mortal gods, destined to find ourselves again in worlds as yet undiscovered,” leads us to seek that freedom through knowledge of facts and events rather than believing or trusting. Bloom sees sources for this conviction in Wesley and the emphasis on the importance of the *felt* religious conversion. However, he points to the gathering at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1801, as the beginning in America of the “doctrine” of experience that has so dominated subsequent American religious experience.

Bloom finds in Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James the original critiques and philosophical influences necessary to understand the American Religion. For Emerson, as for many subsequent Americans, Jesus is regarded as more Exemplar than Redeemer. It is the risen Jesus, rather than Jesus crucified, who remains at the center of the American Religion. Jesus is not historical so much as he is the impartor of the secrets of resurrection. We can know God just as Jesus did, intimates Emerson, who also warns that we must continually reimagine the sacred historical texts in order to attain that knowledge. Today this understanding, along with the subsequent emphasis by James on awareness as faith, stands in tension with fundamentalism. For Bloom fundamentalism is the “shadow side of what is most spiritual and valuable in the American Religion.” He fears that the experiential question he so admires in the American Religion is placed at risk by the fundamentalist insistence on biblical inerrancy, which effectively subjects believers to the professedly non-interpretive

tive (and thus unchallengeable) declarations of their pastors.

Bloom does not care to criticize the wholly experiential faith so much as to trace its genealogy and spiritual manifestations, and he thus expends little effort in trying to explain, for example, the unspecifiable vacuities of the New Age movement. Christian Science, Pentecostalism, the Jehovah's Witnesses (the antithesis of the American Religion for Bloom), African-American religion, and Seventh-day Adventism each receive critical vignettes suggesting their place in the larger scheme of things. But these are merely "Rival American Originals" to the two candidates far more interesting to Bloom, the denominations that he believes will dominate the future of the American Religion: Mormonism and the Southern Baptist Convention. Identifying Joseph Smith's radical deification of the human being as peculiarly American, Bloom does

acknowledge that the Mormon Church has significantly distanced itself from the original prophet's emphases. So as not to diminish Smith's relevance to his overall argument, Bloom then curiously manages to find him in all other manifestations of the American Religion.

Within the Southern Baptists Bloom locates a strong Gnostic influence in E. Y. Mullins' doctrine of "soul competency," used by the church to justify a highly individualized experiential faith that shuns corporate creeds and all manner of religion by proxy. Bloom believes this doctrine potentially breaks down

any remaining metaphysical boundaries distinguishing Jesus from the believer, "with rather unfortunate societal and psychical consequences." Walking alone in the garden with Jesus becomes the metaphor that effaces the Logos as Other, making Emersonian self-reliance into the sole spiritual virtue. Thus does the American Religion become more Gnostic than Christian in its theology.

A remnant church is unlikely to greet warmly any assertions that it has been an important historical exemplar of Bloom's Gnostic American Religion.

Bloom concedes that "the Adventists have a theology peculiar to them, one that is revelatory of an American spirituality quite different from any other," but he insists on their historical compatibility with the rise of the American Religion. For him, Ellen White is both the source of that original confluence in the 19th century and the lone obstacle to "absorption into the Fundamentalist desert of middle-class morality" in the

20th. The very drabness and anonymity of her religious imagination strike Bloom as in marked contrast to the likes of Joseph Smith. No admirer of White's "simplistic and compulsive" prose style, Bloom marvels that she succeeded in making a religion out of a particular people, the Millerite disappointed. Bloom sees in White "an endlessly firm dogmatist" whose unsurpassedly convoluted theology has gradually yielded to the same forces threatening the American Religion today: the doctrinal mainstream from without, and fundamentalism from within. Following

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Malcom Bull and Keith Lockhart's *Seeking a Sanctuary*, he sees Adventism changing from what was once a negation of material prosperity into a substitute for it. Apocalyptic yearnings have dimmed and yielded to the ongoing "medicalization" of the church's identity. To his mind, all that now lingers in Adventism is White's "desperate will-to-health, a quest for survival amidst every kind of disappointment secular and spiritual."

Commenting on the distinguishing characteristics of Adventism, Bloom notes approvingly the Adventist rejection of the immortal soul as an entity separate from the body. He does take exception to the doctrine of the Investigative Judgment, which he thinks leads effectively to Satanic atonement, as all sins are heaped upon Satan's shoulders on some hidden cosmic stage.

Perhaps it is my own inadequate soul-competency that dictates caution regarding his characterizations. Bloom is justified in wondering if Adventists as a branch of the American Religion are not simply employing apocalyptic figurations to assert their special access to the unseen world of good and evil, gods and demons. Yet the vague notion of shamanism he frequently invokes as the key element in original Adventism still seems inadequate to explain the drama that Adventists would invoke. I cannot help but think that the central trope of Seventh-day Adventism, the great controversy, remains in the end a system of cosmological redemption that is difficult to reconcile with Bloom's central vision of the American Religion: the individual in confident apprehension of the resurrected Jesus. If anything, Adventism's particular vision, rather than urging recovery of a primordial God-in-the-self, risks making the believer into an ever-hopeful spectator.

Behind the mournful visage of the éminence grise from Yale lurks a man still happy to engage in provocations. It is my suspicion that Bloom's theses will not, however, become

"canonical" in any field. Bloom is that rare creature, the accomplished academic grazer who forages widely, though he always returns to his basic thesis, the American search for freedom and solitude. In this work, he has rushed in where specialized academics fear to tread. He offers broad syntheses and outrageous insights, but little sense that the American Religion he describes does not fully determine the complex historical and religious experiences of the groups under consideration, not to mention the larger portion of the population that somehow never falls under his purview.

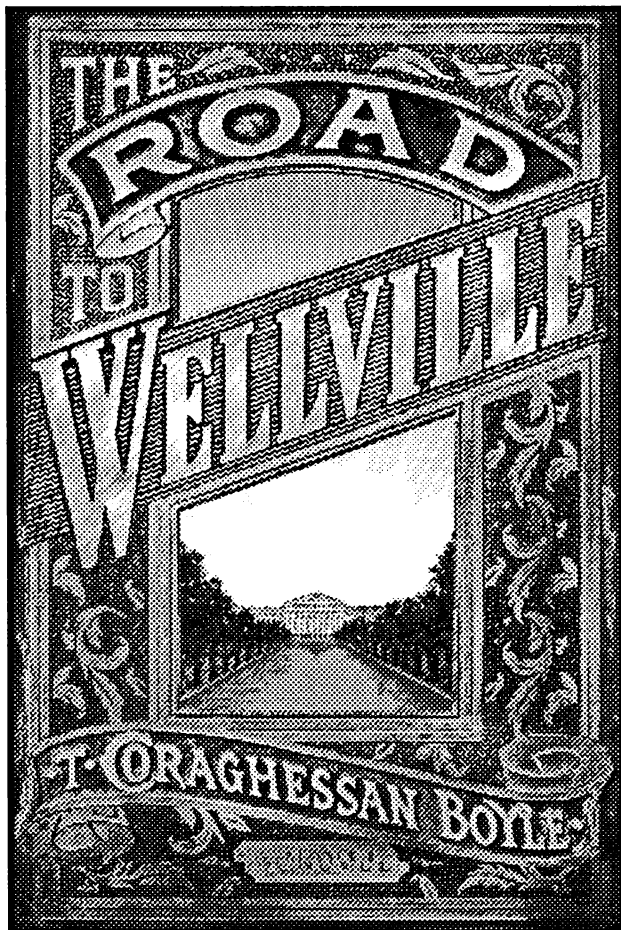
The religious historian Martin Marty has suggested a relevant contrast between the "private Protestantism" whose experiential faith Bloom has treated in his book, and "public Protestantism," whose many forms he neglects: the communitarian aspects of worship, including the sacraments; rationalist (as against Romantic) influences on the American religious imagination; and faith as a source of social action. Bloom's book is a discerning cautionary tale against parochialism in our efforts to understand the experience of private faith and should incite us to further study of its public expression.

Religion wears many garbs, some of them overtly secular, as Bloom's brief musings on the New Age movement remind us. In general, his idiosyncratic tour of the American prophets of transcendence gives short shrift to the many figures who proclaimed secular avenues for experiential questing. To fill out this picture, we may turn to a depiction of one such figure in an equally idiosyncratic source: a novel.

The Road to Wellville by T. Coraghessan Boyle

On December 14, 1943, just into his 10th decade, Adventism's hardest heretic finally ended his quest for proximate godliness

through clean living. John Harvey Kellogg, medical doctor, health evangelist, and visionary head of the sanitarium at Battle Creek for more than half a century, is probably best known among Adventists for his falling out with Ellen White over the matter of church control of the sanitarium early in the century. Whatever residual theological notoriety he may currently enjoy in Adventist circles surely pales next to the influence of the “vast and benign medical establishment” (the phrase is Bloom’s) he did so much to engender. In *The Road to Wellville*, the novelist T. Coraghessan Boyle has turned his caustic wit upon Kellogg at the peak of his career in 1907, and the result, while highly critical of the errant physician’s religion of health, cannot fail to strike a chord of recognition in the medicalized Adventist community of today. If that recognition brings with it occasional moments of discomfort, the reader



should not be put off, for the insights of Boyle’s irreverent book can be quite salutary.

The conventional play of good against evil has no place in Boyle’s novel, and virtue certainly finds no personification in a hero. The one convention carefully attended to is a narrative one: in contrast to some of Boyle’s more complex previous works, *The Road to Wellville* keeps simple, linear storytelling as its central structural conceit, and Boyle shows himself a master of the form. If his pungent prose seems a far cry from congenially didactic Sabbath-afternoon storytelling à la Josephine Cunningham Edwards, his mordantly astute observations of human behavior are easily worth the price of admission.

The enema liberally applied might seem an unlikely path to godhood, but for Boyle’s erstwhile Dr. Kellogg, no aspect of his sanitarium’s daily regimen could be deemed more essential. Determined to win “the battle of biologic living” for the marvelous array of prosperous patients attracted to the sanitarium, Kellogg energetically encourages them to modify their fleshy diets and purge their bodies of all manner of noxious native bacilli. As he never tires of reminding them, five sessions a day with hot paraffin, soap, and tepid water are the only way to achieve the “civilized bowel.”

Kellogg’s constant round of fasting, exercise, “colonic washes,” and “sinusoidal” baths (in which the supposed therapeutic effects of electric currents are utilized) is aimed at curing the ailment invariably diagnosed in his newly arrived patients—“autointoxication.” The denizens of the San tend to be “of a certain class,” and none are admitted who show any serious signs of mortality: disease, disfiguration, poverty. The ills found in the San are self-induced, in Kellogg’s way of thinking, and the proper cure invariably lies in an act of self-discipline, a search for the vital spark of virtue within the self that all must undertake if they are to

recover. For Kellogg we are our own demiurges, daily implicated in the botched creation of our dietary selves by our willful propensity for "auto-intoxication," by our perverse avoidance of the apotheosis that is fully within our grasp.

Enlightenment may come slowly for the San's new patients, though Kellogg knows it does not hurt if one's fellow sufferers in search of the cure also happen to be luminaries like Upton and Meta Sinclair, Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, or Admiral Richard M. Byrd. Kellogg understands the importance of catering to a clientele who come to the San to see and be seen, and "to think positively, eat wisely and subdue their afflictions

with a good long pious round of pampering, abstention and rest." Still Kellogg is a man with a mission and vigilantly monitors his patients' diet of Protose patties, bran biscuits, nut butters, prune fritters, and kaffir tea. Boyle's Kellogg can "put on his lecturer's face as a warrior might have plucked up a shield" in order to captivate his audience with

graphic evidence of the need for fleshly restraint. Even the best company can yield the occasional backslider, though, and in the fictive person of Will Lightbody, Kellogg encounters the skeptical foil Boyle requires to skewer the good doctor's conceits.

Will and his wife, Eleanor, hail from Peterskill, N.Y., where upper-middle class respectability has unsurprisingly failed to secure domestic bliss for the young couple. Vaguely employed in his father's successful business, Will is already becoming more intent on his alcohol and gastric distress than he is on making a name for himself. Eleanor exacer-

bates Will's addictive escapism by running off to the San and becoming a devotee of the radical Kellogg regimen. She eventually drags a reluctant Will to its healthy confines in hopes that he will be set aright by the ministrations of Dr. Kellogg and his able staff.

Will's muted misgivings eventually turn into guilty failings in all aspects of the San's program. Disturbed to discover that Kellogg demands absolute sexual restraint ("I preach abstinence, sir, strict abstinence"), Will proceeds to scandalize his keepers by attempting a tryst with Eleanor, and becomes guiltily obsessed with the imagined attentions of a

solicitous young attendant. More than once he gorges himself into a stupor at the steak-and-fries establishment across the street from the San, earning the censure of Eleanor and Dr. Kellogg and landing him back at square one in his treatments. Endlessly irrigated and dietetically purified, he only grows more convinced of his hopeless corporal and spiritual inadequacy.

Kellogg's adopted son and nemesis, George, is the one character with no redeeming qualities whatsoever. George is actually not so much a character as a personification of the Kelloggian nightmare of unredeemability, a sort of permanently blocked bowel of the soul.

Boyle's authoritarian Kellogg may suffer from a surfeit of hubris, but he is a man of action, someone whose sleepless industry would seem to invite admiration, however ironic. Unfortunately, that zeal makes him careless of the needs and frailties of others, including the physiological shortcomings of his evocatively named personal secretary, Poultney Dab, whom he literally runs to death.

Let the reader suspect that Kellogg and his health-minded band of followers are the only objects of the author's amiable scorn, Boyle also turns his barbs on men of action

outside the walls of the San. A fictional, would-be entrepreneur, Charlie Ossining, serves as the focus for many of the story's events in the bustling town of Battle Creek itself. By 1907, Dr. Kellogg had concocted the corn flakes that became a thriving business for the doctor and his brother. A multitude of other cereals were soon invented, fueling a booming Battle Creek industry where Charlie hopes to make his fortune.

Charlie's cereal is Per-Fo, whose peptonized and celery-impregnated flakes must first be fabricated and sold in order for Charlie to realize his dreams. This effort turns into an extended shell game that threatens to destroy his chances for attaining respectability. Eventually he joins forces with Kellogg's adopted son and nemesis, George, the one character with no redeeming qualities whatsoever. George is actually not so much a character as a personification of the Kelloggian nightmare of unredeemability, a sort of permanently blocked bowel of the soul. Charlie soon discovers that only an inconvenient regard for the milder civic virtues stands between him and success. Compromise follows, and his desperate strivings for secular salvation prove no more praiseworthy than Kellogg's dietary gnosis.

The Road to Wellville is not a book that will hold much fascination for those merely curious about what image of Adventism they will find in this best-seller. Granted, the Adventist reader cannot help noticing Boyle's generous use of literary license in his portrayal of Ellen White. Even Adventists long skeptical of the historical Sister White will be hard pressed to find her in the dark imaginings of Boyle's Kellogg, who regards her as "the worst kind of rabble-rousing, evangelical charlatan, appealing to the most gullible and ignorant elements" (p. 383). But for Boyle this is a minor matter. His central aim is to "recreate" the past in order

to challenge *present* social phenomena. He has constructed his narrative with a contemporary upper-middle-class audience in mind, an audience financially and culturally capable of making an obsession with its own health and appearance into a kind of religion. Boyle has used the past to write a superbly cynical and perceptive "history" that will help us steer clear of zealots who seek transcendence in corporeal well-being. That said, readers would be aware that Boyle has no intention of muting or complicating this message by injecting into his narrative any of the myriad elements of 19th-century religious experience that made Battle Creek historically possible. I have no quarrels with Boyle's literature-as-history, but we should keep in mind that he is writing the history of our own culture and not that of John Harvey Kellogg.

In *The American Religion* Bloom is also engaged in a concerted critique of contemporary culture, albeit with more explicit reliance on the historical literature. Both Bloom and Boyle think the search for transcendence in modern America has a very practical motivation: our own constant apprehension of death. Their skepticism about the imaginative outlets Americans have found to shield themselves from this fear is expressed in very different forms: Boyle in the style of the amused debunker, Bloom in alternating fits of scholarly admiration and anxiety. Whatever levity or irony they employ should not distract us from their sober insistence that neither present health nor future apocalypse can provide salvation simply because we know it to be so. Indeed, a transcendence appropriate for moral creatures like ourselves would require a larger measure of God's grace than any Gnostic knowledge could ever offer. If these books provide unexpected reminders to that effect, we would do well to pay them heed.