

REVIVAL OF THE GNOSTIC HERESY

FUNDAMENTALISM

Joe E. Morris

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FOREWORD

In this time of religious pluralism, when we are advised to be open to other religions and tolerant toward points of view different from our own, Joe E. Morris seems curiously out of step, for he asks us to look critically at a movement that, through radio and TV, is attracting millions of followers to Fundamentalist megachurches and conservative causes. Is Morris out of sync with the generous American spirit, which prefers “to think and let think?” Yet he points out that Fundamentalism cultivates a mindset that is anything but generous with those who disagree with its interpretation of Christianity. From a fundamentalist standpoint, rigidity is indeed a necessity, because its attraction is lodged in its certainty that it has the right way, the true knowledge, the only option that is supernaturally guaranteed and endorsed. And the human yearning for such certainty is precisely what makes it alluring.

But Morris goes beyond this psychological appeal, which, in a time of confusion, uncertainty, and unrest, is provided by any brand of fundamentalism, whether Christian, Jewish, or Islamic, to the remarkable parallels between modern-day Christian Fundamentalism and the ancient heresies with which early church councils struggled. Because they were convinced that these heresies distorted the truth of the Christian message. It is these parallels that Morris is persuaded justify, calling Fundamentalism a Gnostic heresy. And from his standpoint truth is what is at stake. While he does not deny that Christianity can be interpreted in many ways, as reflected in the various denominations today, there are nevertheless guidelines hammered out by the debates of the early centuries, which succeeded in defining the boundaries of what could be considered authentically Christian. It is these boundaries which Morris is convinced Fundamentalism has overstepped, and he demonstrates this by comparing it with the early gnostic heresies.

To be sure, Gnosticism came in many forms. Some were legalists, others were licentious, some were literalists, while others made extensive use of allegory. It is not surprising, therefore, that Morris finds he is dealing with a slippery phenomenon when he seeks to draw parallels between Gnosticism and present-day Fundamentalism. In Gnosticism of whatever variety, however, one thing seems to be constant and that is its *dualism*, its sharp contrasts between good and evil, light and darkness, the spirit and the material world, the enlightened and the ignorant, the saved and the unsaved. This dualism is written into the nature of reality, because the creator of the world is not God but a demiurge, a half god or fallen angel responsible for evil and the ambiguity of the human situation. The *gnosis* or knowledge that is necessary for salvation is having the right words,

the secret formulas, the names of the gods and demonic powers that one must know in order to pass through the darkness and the various levels of the heavens to where the high God dwells in inexpressible Light.

While Fundamentalism does not posit a duality in God or in the created world, it is dualistic in most other respects, beginning with a clear line between the saved and the unsaved. The saved are those “in the know,” those who are certain and believe all the “fundamentals” and defend them against the evil forces and skepticism of the present age. Hence literalism and “creationism” must be championed against those who would favor an allegorical interpretation of the Genesis stories that would place evolution within a more comprehensive view of the Creator’s relationship to the world. The unsaved are those who refuse to believe that a rigid dualism is the answer to the world’s problems, that all truth lies on one side, and that the other side is bereft of any legitimacy. Yet this is the kind of dualism that characterizes fundamentalist forces, whether they are found in Israel or Arab lands, in India or the United States.

But Fundamentalism, whether of the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or Hindu variety, will be part of our world for the foreseeable future. This means that the larger question that this book raises is, how are we to live in a world of competing fundamentalisms? The first task, it seems to me, is to understand our own religion in a deeper way than has previously been necessary, to understand how all religions seek to answer basic and universal human needs and questions. Getting rid of religion is not the solution and secularism is not the answer. The human needs still remain, and secularism breeds pseudo-religions like nationalism and ethnic fundamentalism that move in to fill the vacuum. The way lies rather in discovering how the religious answers are complementary and not necessarily in competition, and therefore can cooperate to bring peace and stability. If Allah is, as Muslims constantly remind us, the *all-merciful*, and the Jewish and the Christian God is equally all-merciful, what are the dimensions of divine mercy that have the potential to reduce human strife without the necessity to deny any of our traditions? What is called for is a new *gnosis*, an approach to knowledge and knowing that is healing, a knowledge that penetrates through the barriers that we have used to establish our identity by dividing between “us” and “them,” a knowing that penetrates through to the God of the Abrahamic faiths. This is the God who calls us to leave the territories that are familiar and safe with comfortable identities and venture forth out of Ur of the Chaldees (Gen. 15:7) and into a new land where we discover the God who is merciful to humans by making the dualisms and the barriers that Fundamentalism sets up unnecessary.

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PREFACE

This book is the culmination of a long spiritual struggle that began over fifty years ago. When I was seven years old, my parents gave me an *Egermeier's Bible Story Book: A Complete Narration from Genesis to Revelation for Young and Old*. In her Preface the writer states that she endeavored to “familiarize herself with the viewpoint of children and to adapt her language accordingly.”¹ She succeeded with this young reader. The book launched a personal journey to the heart of Christian scripture, a near obsessional drive back to first principles, to the reasons we believe what we believe and the fundamentals of religious faith.

What was so captivating about this book? First of all, it had pictures. I only had to open the book to the first one, a black and white (lithograph) of Adam and Eve, the first humans, dressed in fur clothing covering them to their thighs. They were standing close together, beneath a palm tree, their hands folded in prayer, their faces glum with guilt. In a distant tree I could see a snake that appeared to be crawling away. Two pages later was the Ark Noah built, a huge boxlike ship in a storm. In the distance was a faint rainbow. From that point, all I did was flip pages and look at pictures: Abraham and Lot; Joseph finding his brothers; Moses and Aaron with the magicians; the Red Sea parting for the Israelites; David slaying Goliath, followed by more popular Bible stories. The pictures in the New Testament were not as exciting, not as heroic. They were too quiet. I quickly flipped back to the beginning and began again, this time lingering, absorbing the Old Testament pictures.

This early introduction to the Bible set the framework for my earliest understanding of scripture. For me, these were true stories. The characters were real. Once past the pictures I settled into reading, one story after another. After dinner each evening, I would go straight to bed, turn on my bedside lamp and read. By my ninth birthday I had read *Egermeier's Bible Story Book* over ten times, though I must confess, the New Testament stories got left behind. I did read them, but only once; the resurrection story twice. But not the ten or more times I read about creation and Noah and the Ark, Joseph and his coat of many colors, Samson, Gideon, and so on. I was too impressed with a different type of power, one that colored my theology and my view of scripture for years to come. I believed these stories and all else I read, were literally true. No other interpretation was available to me. This was God's word and God did not lie. Though I did not realize it until a half century later, a dualism was dominating my thinking. One Testament was becoming more important than the other. I did not *become* a Fundamentalist,

as if there existed in that milieu other options to challenge my thinking. I *was* a Fundamentalist. I was born into that religious mindset.

At age twelve, after an eight-week confirmation class, I joined the church and the pastor gave me a handsome, leather-bound King James Version of The Holy Bible. It had pictures. They were slick and colorful. There were maps in the back. When Jesus spoke, the letters were in red. This was all new and fascinating, but it was not *the* Bible. I put down the *King James Bible* and returned to my *Egermeier* storybook.

As I grew older, I was forced to read the King James, the Bible everyone was reading. After all, it was the Bible Jesus used, or so one Sunday school teacher declaimed. Admittedly, it had some advantages. It had chapters and verses, which made it easier to find scripture and follow along, flip back and forth for references. The red letters helped distinguish the word of God through Jesus, versus the word of God through all the other words. The fact that one carried more weight than the others raised an early question. In my *Egermeier* they were all the same. God's word was God's word. Though I did not realize it, in my theologically immature groping mind, this was probably the beginning of my earliest glimpse of dualism. Later it would manifest itself in myriad ways and I would learn the name that went with it: Gnosticism.

I eventually left my revered *Egermeier* at home but took its theological frame of reference with me. Everything I read in the King James Version became as real as the stories of earlier years. Nothing really changed. Same Bible, same theological framework; different book. Everything happened as the first book had said it happened and was now repeated and confirmed, though with different words. *King James* took over, but the power and influence of *Egermeier* never diminished, never lost its magic. At age seventeen, following a terrific struggle, and with young Samuel clearly in mind, I knelt at the altar of my Methodist Church and dedicated my life to the ministry. The preacher that first January Student Sunday had been an influence. Only many years later did he emerge from the closet and announce he was gay, news that did not affect me adversely. He had played a role in my theological development and for that I was grateful. He had tried to get me to look at the scriptures differently, look at the New Testament and its different power, but I was too riveted on the Old Testament, on *that* God. The Old Testament was much easier to understand. The New Testament was too confusing. It lacked energy and excitement. Except for the resurrection of Jesus. Now, there was a touch of the Old Testament power and miracle, God's hand reaching down and touching the Earth. But the parables and the Sermon on the Mount were dry reading. I wanted more excitement and I learned I was in good company. When asked once if he read the Bible, William Faulkner remarked he enjoyed the Old Testament; it was a book about people, the New Testament was one about ideas.²

After graduation from Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi, with a degree in Philosophy under my belt, I entered New College Divinity School at the University of Edinburg, one of the most noted theology schools in the world. T. F.

Torrance, James S. Stewart, and other great theologians from around the world were there. Other great theologians from around the world came and spoke there. God was there—but only for a short while.

A pivotal moment occurred in James Stewart's New Testament class. Someone had asked a question about a certain scripture and Stewart directed them to a Greek text. From studies at Millsaps I knew the New Testament had been written in Greek, not classical Greek but a form called *koine*. When he remarked, however, about lack of spacing and punctuation in the earliest texts, I became alarmed. A space here, period there, could change the entire meaning of a text, possibly a creed or entire theology. That was just the beginning of the end of my comfortable theology. My hand shot up. I rigorously protested. Dr. Stewart suggested, in gentle professorial tones, "Laddie, you might wish to visit the British Museum in London and the Vatican Museum in Rome and see for yourself."

During spring break that year (1966) I did just that, via buses, trains, boats, hitchhiking, one conveyance or another, I made the pilgrimage to see the ancient texts. Beneath their protected beveled glass casements, there they were. Ancient papyrus, block letters running together . . . no punctuation . . . no indication of when one sentence ended and another began. Stewart was nauseatingly, disgustingly right. My theological framework, developed from a literal and unerring Bible, collapsed.

Thus began my scholarly journey (I would like to think scholarly) to prove Professor Stewart wrong, to prove the Bible was without error and could be literally, word for word, believed. *Egermeier*, the storybook for young and old, was holding on, refusing to let go. Because there could be no either—or. One position was right and the other wrong. I was locked into dualism. The journey has taken over fifty years of preaching and pastoring, study and research, for me to understand that both perspectives share validity, that both voices have something to say.

The purpose of this book is to expand on a dialogue already opened and advanced by others. The worlds of religion and theology are particularly indebted to Bruce Metzger, Bart Ehrman, Martin Marty, Scott Appleby, Philip J. Lee, Harold Bloom, Fisher Humphreys, Philip Wise, and many others whose works and contributions will be cited along the way. In particular, Philip Wise in his scholarly presentation, *Against the Protestant Gnosticism*, issues a clear challenge: "to clarify the distinctions between Gnosticism and the faith of the Church . . . to make plain the differences between infinite claims and earthly gratitude, between *gnosis* and faith, between pilgrimage and escape, between self and community, between the exclusive and the inclusive, between the nebulous and the concrete."³

The attempt of this book is not to proselyte. The only agenda is to broaden and deepen the readers' understanding of current theological issues with respect to the history behind those positions. Nor is it my purpose to negatively, or destructively, critique any particular theological approach. There are advantages and disadvantages in any posture of faith. As they surface they will be identified and evaluated. I began this study and research with a single primary hypothesis. But, as is typical of any research, before the experience was concluded not only

had the hypothesis been altered but others also surfaced. We learn and grow. Hopefully, the readers of this book will gain greater understanding of their own religious faith and that of others.

Today my *Egermeier Bible Story Book* remains within easy reach. Spineless and tattered, held together by large rubber bands, it rests prominently between a copy of *Young's Analytical Concordance of the Bible* and a *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece*, on a bookshelf with *H KAINH ΔΙΑΘΗΚΗ* (The British and Foreign Bible Society's text of the Greek New Testament with revised critical apparatus), a sixteenth-century copy of a *Geneva Bible*, a *Revised Standard Version*, *New International Revised Version*, *King James Version*, J. B. Phillips *New Testament* translation, *Cambridge New Testament* (1847), *New English Bible*, and *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*. On that same shelf are my old Greek, Latin, and Hebrew language study guides, a shelf strategically positioned among others that hold volume upon volume of church history, doctrine, and dogma, church organization, discipline, and ethics, a wall as sacred and dear to me as one for others on the Temple Mount. A single book, though, the lynchpin, where it all began: *The Egermeier Bible Story Book . . . For Young and Old*. And today, as though time had not skipped a beat, I still get in bed each evening and read about God and his Creation, the Christ and his works of compassion, the Holy Spirit and its eternal presence. And sometimes it is the *Egermeier Bible Story Book* I read.

INTRODUCTION

The heresy of one age becomes the orthodoxy of the next.

—Helen Keller

THEIR NAME COMES FROM A GREEK WORD THAT MEANS “KNOW.” THEY BECAME the first Christian *heresy*, a Greek word that means “choice.” They were deemed by their opponents to have made the wrong choice, chosen the wrong way, the wrong Christ, even the wrong God. Their “bad” theology was assailed in a scribal battle of pen and parchment, a fierce war of words and books the world may never see again. Their beliefs were scorned and maligned; their faithful excommunicated and run out of town; their books and writings banned and burned.

Because of the successful suppression and purge of their correspondence and writings, we know very little about them. What we do know is filtered mostly from the writings of their opponents—highly intelligent and rigorous Christian heresy hunters or heresiologists—later to become more familiarly known as the “early church fathers.” We do know at one time, under the leadership of a man named Marcion, they were a strong presence in the Mediterranean world. They were a highly organized church complete with a hierarchy of bishops, elders, and deacons. This highly stratified *ecclesia* met regularly in sanctioned synods. They had their own bible and creed, their own liturgy and sacraments. Most of them called themselves Christian.

Then, during the third and fourth centuries CE, out-numbered and out-organized, attacked on one side by the populist orthodox bishops and on the other by pagan¹ Greek and Egyptian Platonists, they vanished, faded eastward from the scene across the Syrian Desert toward Persia. So aggressive and thorough was the campaign against them that they were thought to have been permanently extinguished. Centuries later they were well outside the Byzantine Empire but without their identity. Fragmented and spread over a large area (today’s Iraq and Iran), they had merged with the Mandaeans, a religion with shared beliefs.² Yet, over the centuries, under varying religious cloaks and guises, they have surfaced. They are the *Gnostics*. And they are back.

They are back full force, congregations of them, with their own churches, cathedrals, priests, liturgies, creeds, catechisms, lectionaries, Web sites, and structure. Marcion would be proud. Their churches, much like those of mainstream Christianity, have their own names—The Gnostic Church of St. Mary Magdalene, Ecclesiastica Gnostica, Queen of Heaven Gnostic Church, The Apostolic Johanne. Their beliefs vary, but mostly follow those laid down by their forebears two millennia ago.

Some say Gnosticism is back because of the recent flurry over *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Passion of the Christ*, that the accompanying media hype has created a renewed interest in Christianity, more specifically the history of the early church and its Gnostic challenge. Certainly, Dan Brown and Mel Gibson have contributed, but they scarcely get all the credit. Other less dramatic influences include the 1979 publication of Elaine Pagels' best-selling *The Gnostic Gospels*,³ a book, some have argued, that paved the way for Brown's astronomical success.⁴ But all of these knowledgeable and talented individuals are indebted to something that happened decades earlier. *The Gnostic Gospels* may never have seen the light of day without the 1945 discovery of thirteen leather-bound books in the Egyptian desert: the real Gnostic gospels.⁵ A century earlier was another startling discovery. At St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai, a thirty-year-old forerunner of Indiana Jones, Dr. Constantin von Tischendorf, came upon the now-revered Codex Sinaiticus. This fourth-century volume, found in a wastebasket full of papers used to light the monastery oven, brings us closer than ever to the original New Testament. Biblical scholar Bruce Metzger has called it "the only known complete copy of the Greek New Testament in uncial script."⁶ Then there are the Dead Sea Scrolls, by now a story known to all of us, of the Bedouin shepherd boy who, while searching for a lost sheep, cast a stone into a desert cave. Upon hearing something shatter, he explored further and stumbled over tall, slender jars containing scrolls of ancient manuscripts.

No single cause explains the Gnostics rapid and visible return. The mix of history, archaeology, and fiction has always been a good combination for resurrecting old movements and spawning new ones. But it does not fully explain this sudden reemergence. Why *this* rapid visible rise? Why does it seem we are hearing about Gnosticism as though it were some new religious kid on an already crowded ecclesiastical block?

There are some who say that Gnosticism simply never left and that the relatively recent discoveries of old books and publications of new ones had little to do with "jump starting" a movement that never died. Those confident of this belief are members of Ecclesia Gnostica and other Gnostic congregations like them scattered around America and throughout the world. They were here first, before James Robinson translated the ancient Nag Hammadi texts for the world to read and before Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels* was published. These latter-day Gnostics will direct your attention to history and point out that the Cathars, Rosicrucians, Knights Templar, Esoteric Freemasons, and Theosophists had roots in Gnosticism.⁷ They will remind you that the study of Gnosticism was thriving in the nineteenth century, championed by well-known scholars and writers—such as William Blake (1757–1827), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), Herman Melville (1819–91), and William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)⁸—and influenced in the twentieth century by the likes of Carl Jung, Eric Voegelin, Harold Bloom, Wallace Stevens, Yeats, and Hermann Hesse. With pride, they will tell you a Gnostic church was reestablished in France in 1890 and is still active today. A well-informed member of the Ecclesia Gnostica will relate how a man named Stephen

Hoeller came from England in the 1950s and in the '70s started the Ecclesia Gnostica Church and the Gnostic Society.⁹ And there are others. In 1985, the American Gnostic Church in Texas began reflecting the second century teachings of Basilides.¹⁰ In January, 1962, Tau Rosamonde Miller was contacted and offered ordination by emissaries of the bishop of the Mary Magdalene Order (Holy Order of Miriam of Magdala) in Paris, France, and became ordained in 1974 in her own church, The Ecclesia Gnostica Mysteriorum in Palo Alto, California. Nor will these contemporary Gnostics omit, in their catalogue of modern influence and successes, the Ordo Templi Orientis, its international influence and rival claims to “apostolic succession.”¹¹

On and on the new Gnostics could go, citing names and locations of Gnostic churches and organizations, as myriad now as in the first four centuries CE before they were drummed into the desert. In short, ancient manuscript discoveries, plus popular film and fiction, have surely had an accumulative effect in creating more visibility and name recognition. But Gnosticism in this country was alive and well long before Dan Brown, Mel Gibson, and Elaine Pagels; long before the 1945 discovery of ancient Gnostic texts in the Egyptian desert at Nag Hammadi.

It is not a purpose of this book to resurrect old conflicts and question the presence and practice of Gnosticism in this country or abroad. Nor is there an intention to question the beliefs of Gnosticism or Gnosticism's right to exist and worship peacefully. It is the objective of this study, however, to probe deeper into the culture of American religion and investigate further the Gnostic phenomenon and ask the questions: Is that all there is? Are these the only manifestations of Gnosticism? Might there be one which has been around longer, covered more territory, attracted more converts? Is it possible that another medium of Gnosticism exists today, one not on the fringes of society but in its mainstream? One so ingrained and part of our culture we do not recognize it? One which is beamed electronically, daily, into our homes? One cloaked with all the righteous trappings of orthodoxy that we would never suspect, never pause and say, “Ah, now therein possibly lies a heresy.” One some of us grew up with, studied, and would not see for forty years, even with theological credentials? “Is it possible,” asked Philip Lee in his groundbreaking work “that by identifying a Gnostic thought pattern with those *outside* the Christian community, we have failed to locate it in its natural habitat?”¹² Is Harold Bloom accurate when he states, “We live now, more than ever in an America where a great many people are Gnostics without knowing it?”¹³

Since the first pilgrim set foot on American soil, there has been a growing continuity of religious phenomena within this country that has no resemblance to the mother church from which it sprang. For over two hundred years the God most Americans have sought has little or no resemblance to the God of European Christianity, the God of the great Reformers. Doctrinally, the old continental faith and the more recent belief systems of which I speak appear similar—“appear” a key word. Theologically, superficially, they appear the same; but behaviorally they are different. They share and participate in similar liturgies—baptism and Holy

Communion. They share the same source, the Holy Bible. But the interpretation and delivery of the more recent message parallels Gnosticism more than it does mainstream Christianity.

Though they are Gnostic cousins, I am not speaking of Jewish Kabbalists and Muslim Sufis, spiritualism and spiritualists. Nor am I speaking of people with nonmainstream religious beliefs we hear about from time to time—the Scientologists, Moonies, Hare Krishna, Branch Davidians, the Rosicrucians, or Masons. Nor am I referring to New Age parodies of Shirley MacLaine and Arianna Huffington. Though there may be some resemblance to Gnosticism, this phenomenon is not intergalactic thinking, UFOlogy, cosmogonist speculation, or orgiastic cult mentioned in *The Da Vinci Code*. Nor am I suggesting the “new Gnosticism” that questions the reliability and authenticity of tradition and scripture.

This religion of which I am speaking is a form of Gnosticism that is very much alive and active in today’s organized church, as it was in the early centuries after Christ. I am speaking of “Gnostics” who embrace the authenticity of tradition and scripture, worship every Sunday and attend Wednesday evening prayer meetings. On the surface, they are midstream, mainstream America. They sit on city councils and on administrative and corporate boards. They belong to the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), garden club, Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), and Junior Auxiliary. They volunteer for the United Way, Salvation Army, local hospital and library. They hold elected office, exercise considerable political clout, and have been arguably credited with swinging national elections. They are groups and individuals we know by varying names and denominations, but who, in more recent times, have fallen under the label of “religious right.” According to Harold Bloom “they are scattered wherever our new southern and western Republican overlords worship: in Salt Lake City and Dallas and wherever else Mormon temples and Southern Baptist First Churches pierce the heavens.”¹⁴ These Gnostics of whom I speak are . . . the Fundamentalists.

Fundamentalism sounds . . . well . . . very *fundamental*. As its definition suggests, it is very basic, essential; nothing that would resemble anything unorthodox, nonessential, off the beaten path . . . heretical. With its emphasis on back-to-the-Bible theology and conservative values, one would not typically associate Fundamentalism with heresy. In fact, Fundamentalists would lead you to think the opposite: all others, except them, are the heretics.

But a closer examination raises questions: Are the basic tenets and practices of Fundamentalism not a mirror of those of ancient Gnostics? If they are not one and the same, are they not close enough to pass as branches from the same family tree? To answer these questions the first section of the book is devoted to a study and exploration of Gnosticism, followed by a second section of equal rigorous examination of Fundamentalism then concluded by a final segment in which the two are comparatively reviewed.

The primary aim of this work is to examine Gnosticism and Fundamentalism, make comparisons, and draw perspectives that will help others understand

their own religious beliefs, the origins of those beliefs, and their implications for decisions in this modern world. A secondary aim is to help members of local churches understand that documents buried in Egypt centuries ago, and the faith they represented, do have something to do with their faith. The hopeful result will be more dialogue within the diversity of those two religious movements, more flexibility between their camps.

A few explanations are in order. Throughout the book I will follow the practice of Humphreys and Wise,¹⁵ and others, by capitalizing Fundamentalism when referring to the original American movement and using fundamentalism (lowercase) when referencing the more general religious movements, which include other faiths such as Islam and Judaism. Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptural quotes are from the *New International Version (NIV)*.¹⁶

Orthodoxy is defined as “the practice of being orthodox,” which means “conforming to the usual beliefs or established doctrines, especially in religion.”¹⁷ The definition for our purposes applies to those “beliefs or established doctrines” of the early Christian Church at the time of, and following, the formal acceptance of the Nicene Creed (325 CE). Because orthodoxy, or “right opinion,” was not fully established in the Christian Church until the fourth century, the early adherents or forerunners of those teachings are referred to by many scholars as proto-orthodox (before orthodoxy).

For the purposes of this study, Classical Gnosticism is included among the Gnostic variants, but our major concern and focus is Christian Gnosticism, the product of the former. This was the form of Gnosticism considered by the early church apologists to be most threatening and the recipient of their vitriolic attacks.

Because most of us are creatures of habit, another issue that generates some concern among Christians is the shift in dividing time from BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini) to BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era). We Christians must realize, and rally understanding, that for those of other faiths—Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and so on—Jesus is not Lord and the abbreviations that work well for us, lack meaning and relevance for them. For this reason, most scholars have begun using the more inclusive abbreviations. Therefore “Common Era” means common to all people of all faiths who use the calendar of Western civilization and “BCE” means “Before the Common Era.” The newer trend will be followed in this book.

For those who wish to pursue the historical issues in greater detail, in addition to the Bibliography, there is a list of books for suggested reading. Due to the nature of the study, some of the terms may be new to even the scholarly and academic reader. Notes are available for definitions and interpretations and there is a glossary of key terms and names (Appendices A and B respectively). Additional appendices include a chronology of key events and brief biographical sketches of important early Church Fathers and Gnostic Christian leaders.

REVIVAL OF THE GNOSTIC HERESY

FUNDAMENTALISM

DESPITE THE NEARLY TWO MILLENNIA SEPARATING THEM, Gnosticism and Fundamentalism evolved in similar sociocultural matrices. Though much has changed, technologically speaking, the human condition has changed very little. This has been the general consensus in the numerous books and papers researched for this project. One book in particular caught my attention. It contained portions of a dialogue between Tobias Churton and Hans Jonas, names that might not resonate with the reader but are well known in religious studies.

Churton is a Gnostic scholar, writer, and film producer. Author of *The Gnostics*, he is best known for his documentary on Gnosticism for British television. Professor Jonas has been called the “old master” of Gnostic studies. He was writing about Gnosticism when he was a student of existentialist Martin Heidegger and New Testament scholar Rudolph Bultmann. This was in the 1920s, before Hitler came to power, long before Nag Hammadi. Because he was a Jew, Jonas’s writings were restricted. Below is a segment of that lengthy interview Churton conducted in 1986 with Professor Jonas in his home in New Rochelle, New York:¹

Churton: I have been putting forth the thesis that we live in times with remarkable parallels with this period . . . the fear of cosmic catastrophe, apocalyptic expectation, boredom with institutional religion and alienation from the business of running the Empire and being part of that.

Jonas: Oh yes, certainly they are the main ones. . . . There is certainly widespread disease in the modern mind concerning this age-old question of what it is all about. . . . Are the concerns of the day, the pressing needs of day-to-day existence, is that all there is to it? . . . a kind of nihilism . . . of not knowing what the standards are . . . a sign that something is out of joint . . . and we hear these old voices which tell us that the out-of-jointness is not just the accident of a particular situation but belongs to man’s being in the world, but that our roots may be somewhere else—that we may be exiles.

Churton: What was there in the historical situation of the second century Empire which might have promoted this feeling?

Jonas: major dislocations of national cultures. From the conquest of Alexander the Great (334–323 B.C.), the establishment of cosmopolitan Hellenistic (Greek-influenced) civilization . . . national traditions driven underground but in their subterranean survival they underwent certain changes . . . which bred also the spirit of rebelliousness. The official dominant culture which was then taken over by the Roman Empire . . . did not express the indigenous spirit of the conquered in its new urban civilization.

Churton: So the individual became a part of the machine.

Jonas: Yes.

“The individual became a part of the machine.” That one sentence caught my eye. That same individual is the individual of today: rootless, overwhelmed, fearful of losing identity. In that same interview Churton made the following statement: “All over the Empire, people were going beyond the received culture in search of a penetrating vision of life which made sense to them.”² Unsurprisingly, there was a scramble for meaning among a multitude of religions and sects. People were trying to latch onto anything with half a promise of hope and salvation. They needed something more than the bare “isness,” the out-of-jointness to which Jonas refers. This is the cultural matrix from which Christianity and Gnosticism sprang. Another polyglot cultural milieu produced a similar theological defense against a different machine, a different brand of modernity: Fundamentalism.

The fact that all three—early Christianity, Gnosticism, and Fundamentalism—were diverse and broken into myriad representations is another reflection of the fragmentation of their cultures. Gnosticism had as many schools of thought as devotees, certainly teachers. Christianity was more complex then it is now. Pagels underscores this range of mixture: “Contemporary Christianity, as diverse and complex as we find it, actually may show more unanimity than the Christian churches of the first and second centuries.”³ Ehrman presents a similar perspective:

It may be difficult to imagine a religious phenomenon more diverse than modern day Christianity . . . all this diversity of belief and practice, and the intolerance that occasionally results, makes it difficult to know whether we should think of Christianity as one thing or lots of things, whether we should speak of Christianity or Christianities. What could be more diverse than this variegated phenomenon, Christianity in the modern world? . . . Christianity in the ancient world . . . the practices and beliefs found among people who called themselves Christian were so varied that the differences between Roman Catholics, Primitive Baptists, and Seventh-Day Adventists pale by comparison.⁴

A product of this more recent swirling theological mix is Fundamentalism, which emerged in response to the onset of Darwinism, liberal theology, and a growing secularism due primarily to the Industrial Revolution. The machine was back. And so was Gnosticism . . . though in a different form.

In a recent prominent national publication, Anglican Bishop Nicholas Thomas Wright is quoted as saying, “the Gnostics were more like contemporary American

fundamentalists than most liberal-minded of Gnostic supporters would like to acknowledge.”⁵ Religious critic Harold Bloom makes similar comments: “Mormons and Baptists call themselves Christians but like most Americans they are closer to ancient Gnostics than to early Christians.”⁶ Then again: “Gnosticism, the most negative of all ancient negative theologies, emerges again in the Southern Baptists.”⁷ Protestant theologian Philip Lee joins the chorus: “Despite the vast cultural differences between North American Protestantism and ancient Gnosticism, parallels of the two innovations can no longer be ignored.”⁸

Are these accurate statements? Do they truly characterize current religious expressions of Fundamentalism? Are the comparisons with Gnosticism, ancient or modern, justified? If so, what is the nature of the relationship between Gnosticism and Fundamentalism? Is there any historical cause and effect? Is Fundamentalism part of an ongoing, though dormant, form of religion, one that has surfaced from time to time over the centuries with dogmas and behaviors that suggest a linkage to classical Gnosticism? Or is it a unique religious phenomenon endemic to the American scene, a product of its rugged pioneer individualism?

These are all legitimate questions and drive us back to the core concepts of Gnosticism and Fundamentalism previously outlined in Chapters 2 and 7. The material in this book will demonstrate not only that Gnosticism is back but also that it is back with a Fundamentalist persona, clothed in Fundamentalist themes and terminology.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN CHRISTIAN GNOSTICISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM

Why are so many people, Christians or otherwise, interested in the Nag Hammadi texts, which are writings considered hostile and destructive to the Christian faith? Philip Lee posed that rhetorical question a few decades ago: “Perhaps the answer is that modern readers find in this literature an immediacy which claims their attention. These Gnostic ideas strike a familiar chord for modern ears: we sense that we have heard something before—or something very much like them.”⁹ We have heard it before and continue to hear it daily. Surf television or radio stations daily and you will see and hear the message of the fastest growing religion in Christianity: Fundamentalism. People are listening. They feel rootless, caught in a mood of despair, fearful of losing their identity . . . angry . . . trapped in a machine. The message of their denominations no longer interfaces with their needs. The words and rituals no longer resonate. That formal institutional church they had depended on has become a dinosaur. They are looking for a sudden infusion of hope, an espresso cure, straight IV therapy, an injection that goes straight to the spiritual heart and revives instantaneously.

Little has changed in the history of American religion: “Since the time of the first Great Awakening, there has been within North American Protestantism a tendency to seek a quick religious *fix*, so that in one brilliant moment a single solution may be found to all the problems of life.”¹⁰ This is the American way.

This is the message we have heard before, the reason ancient texts resonate to our modern ears. It seems to be intellectually satisfying for some people to divide life and the world into the “good” and the “evil” and “right” and “wrong.”

DUALISTIC REALITY: SPIRIT VERSUS MATTER

The cradles of Gnosticism and dualism were Persia (Iran and Iraq) and the deserts of Syria and Egypt—Mithraism, Zoroastrianism, Jewish Apocalypticism. The philosophical orientation of these systems is not reality-oriented. Their myths and patterns of behavior are not reflective of reality. Their ontology (philosophy of being) is grounded more in fantasy, flights of fancy, illusion, and make-believe. In Gnostic literature and theology, this simplistic worldview is persistent and universally expressed. There is no attempt to veil its imagery or symbols. Matter, or flesh, is evil. Spirit is good. There was no in-between. It was a clear-cut way of making sense of a congested world.

For some, dualism and Gnosticism are synonymous.¹¹ Dualism is certainly not a foreign concept to Christianity. It is ever present in the New Testament and in some parts of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha. That is hard scriptural fact. Themes in the Gospel of John and Letters of Paul are unmistakably dualistic. They are conspicuous in the Gospel of John. When the writer (or writers) speaks of light and darkness, the spiritual versus the physical world, he is in the realm of dualism. Though he does not speculate about the divine or lower worlds, Paul’s letters are replete with the antithesis of flesh and spirit, where “flesh” represents fallen humanity. Perkins expresses that “Paul’s perception of the flesh as the entry point for the sinful desires that ultimately bring death to humans unless they receive the Spirit of Christ comes very close to what one finds in Gnostic mythologizing.”¹² This dualism of evil and good, flesh versus spirit, surfaces in the synoptic gospels and Johannine epistles, which, most scholars agree, were targeted by the writer specifically against a Gnostic group or sect that had broken away from the Church.

These dualistic themes within the New Testament, however, are within the context of an incarnated Christ, “The word became flesh” (John 1:14). They are pulled together, gathered into that singular event and person, so the polarities, the contradictions, are subsumed and held in balanced tension. Except in parts of the Gospel of John, a theological dialectic is maintained between the humanity of Christ and His divinity. Conflicts would rage about this issue for centuries. The strife continued through the Councils of Nicaea (325 CE) and Chalcedon (451 CE) where the two natures of Christ, the divine and the human, were hammered out and articulated in creedal form.¹³ The dualism of Gnosticism and Fundamentalism, of the physical world versus the spiritual world, is another matter. Most scholars contend that they are not only imbalanced but also significantly skewed toward the divine pole of the theological spectrum.

Where is dualism, the splitting of reality into physical and spiritual (evil and good) compartments, evident in Fundamentalism? On the surface it is not openly

manifested. Nothing in its creedal statements, resolutions, or “Five Fundamentals” overtly states that the Spirit is good; matter is evil. There are no seminary classes in conservative schools of theology labeled, “Dualism 101.” It is neither an obvious theme preached from pulpits nor sung specifically from hymnals. Dualism is not among the Fundamentalist “formulas” one hears—sin, salvation, judgment, redemption, atonement, and so on. But dualism is there. It is imbedded in the themes of evil flesh and saving spirit. Dualism is evident when one speaks of the bad world and the need to set oneself apart from that world by leading a spirit-filled, or spiritual, life . . . by *knowing* Jesus. It is implied in any messages one hears about a God who is good and a Satan or devil who is bad.¹⁴

Gnostics and Fundamentalists agree that the material, physical world is evil and irredeemable. Matter cannot be justified or remedied. Materiality is denounced; spirit is good. Only the spirit can overcome evil. Only by *knowing* the Redeemer, says Gnosticism, can one escape the dark world of ignorance and incomprehension and be saved into the world of Eternal Light. In Fundamentalism, only by *knowing* Christ and accepting Him as savior can one abide in His spirit and be saved from the evil world.

This conceptual framework and nomenclature are identical with Gnosticism. However, Gnostics are not saved from sin, as Fundamentalists are, but from ignorance and incomprehension. (The case could be made that “knowing Christ” and “knowing” and “believing” for Fundamentalists are signs of comprehension. The Fundamental concept of knowing Christ comes very close to Gnostic comprehension, which places salvation in control of the knower or believer.) The Fundamentalist’s sin is of the flesh, of the world. The spirit is of the other world. We are back to the two operant spheres of evil and good. The spiritual guide, or Redeemer, will save us and deliver us to the heavenly realm.

The renunciation of the world—of worldly ambition, appetites, and goods—is indispensable for Gnostic and Fundamentalist spiritual salvation. Separation from the concerns of humanity and manifestation of a new heavenly identity is inextricably bound up with their view of humanity.

DUALISTIC HUMANITY: SPIRITUAL VERSUS PHYSICAL

Gnostic and Fundamentalist dualism splits reality, which affects their understanding of humanity. An alternate Webster’s definition for “dualism” is “a doctrine that man has two natures, physical and spiritual.”¹⁵ The theme recapitulates: flesh is evil; spirit is good. In Gnosticism this division is more complicated, primarily because there were different types of Gnosticism. Two types were predominant within Christian Gnosticism: Docetist and Separatist. These two forms of Gnosticism have been previously discussed and are important for any comparison with Fundamentalism’s understanding of humanity.

The Docetist portrayal of humanity logically follows from its dualistic view of the world and absolute divine Christology. Humans are made of flesh, which is evil. Yet residing in the elect is the divine spark that connects them with the

divine redeemer who reunites them with the Divine Light from which they have been separated. This can happen only through the attainment of *gnosis*, knowledge necessary for salvation.

The Separatists, on the other hand, advanced a Christology in which the Godhead partially entered Christ at baptism and left him at his crucifixion. This form of dualism, an attempt at compromise with the proto-orthodox Christian concept of two natures, allowed them to have it both ways. They could portray Jesus and Christ as distinct entities, yet maintain Jesus's humanity without sacrificing Christ's divinity. Previously noted, the Separatists divided humanity into three groups, two that are precursors of Fundamentalism: (1) the *pneumatics*, or spiritual ones whose spirituality placed them superior to others, and (2) the *psychics*, guided by literal interpretation and by legalism. Both of these are characteristic of conservative theology. Theoretically, they articulate a theology of grace. But in actuality, salvation is through "knowing" Jesus and a personal decision related to that "knowing." The operant of salvation is the "knower," not the One known. The grace of God is a dominant theme of Fundamental theology, but behaviorally it is deemphasized, soft-pedaled. Each person "works out," that is, evokes, his or her own personal salvation.

A "theory of humanity" is not explicitly stated in the "Five Fundamentals," and little is expressed in *The Fundamentals*. Like Gnosticism, there is no particular document Fundamentalists can identify as their "theory of humanity." Fisher Humphreys and Philip Wise briefly address the Fundamentalist understanding of humankind in the segment on "The Substitutionary Atonement." Otherwise limited information was available about Fundamentalist orientation toward humanity.¹⁶ The issue is not addressed in J. I. Packer's book entitled *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*.¹⁷ One of the reasons might be an apparent obsession with Fundamentalists in their defense of the "Five Fundamentals" with emphasis on the inerrant, literal scripture and the historicity of miracles. Another might be a theological imbalance. Their primary doctrines are the "Five Fundamentals." Even in *The Fundamentals*, written between 1910 and 1915, there is a heavy emphasis on Christ but little about his humanity and there was nothing about the Trinity. Based on our limited knowledge, what is the Fundamentalist view of humanity?

The Fundamentalist understanding of humankind is less complex than the Gnostic positions, but it is unmistakably dualistic. Following along Protestant doctrinal lines, from which it basically evolved, Fundamentalism asserts that humanity exists in a fallen, sinful state. This fallen state began in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve acted against God's wishes and partook of fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In this fallen state humans are totally separated from God. Their only hope of salvation from sin and assurance of reentry to the Garden is through the forgiveness of sin by faith in Christ. The requirement on the human side of the equation is repentance. That encapsulation is oversimplified but a fair summation of the Fundamentalist perception of the human situation. Essentially, flesh is evil. The soul, which resides in the body, will rise to join the Father . . . return home to Eden on the "last day."

How do Fundamentalists and Gnostics differ in their understanding of humanity? The answer is difficult because the themes of both interpretations are complex. They do agree that flesh is evil and bad; the spirit is divine and good. Both agree that humankind is fallen and needs to be saved; for the Gnostics from ignorance and the Fundamentalists from sin. For Fundamentalism, the inner spirit is corrupt. Both are capable of communing one-on-one with the transcendent Supreme Spirit. For the Gnostics this is made possible by an inner "divine spark" possessed by only a select few. For the Fundamentalists, the Spirit intervenes, creating a channel of communion with the corrupt inner spirit. In almost all forms of Gnosticism, and some brands of Fundamentalism, this divine spark or pneumatic spirit is not available to everyone but only in a select few. Some Baptists, particularly Primitive, hold this view.¹⁸ Mormons, Pentecostals, Church of God, and Seventh-day Adventists maintain this belief, in practice if not doctrinally.¹⁹

SALVATION

The end goal of both Gnosticism and Fundamentalism is salvation for the individual, not the community. Salvation for Gnostics and Fundamentalists is individual-centered. Knowledge is the common denominator. The similarity of concepts of knowledge and salvation for Early Gnosticism and Christianity created major problems at the Church in Corinth: "Their ecstatic identification with a heavenly Christ led the Corinthian opponents to stress the freedom of the true believer from the restraints of the material world. . . . The individual attains immortality and freedom in knowing the Savior; not through the death of Christ on the cross or some future resurrection of the body."²⁰

In Gnosticism, individuals discover their true identity and receive eternal life, by "knowing" the living divine redeemer, not because of his death on a cross. In Fundamentalism, individuals accept and "know" Christ as their personal savior, a kind of "Gnostic knowing of Jesus through divine acquaintance."²¹ As previously indicated, the Fundamentalist concept of "knowing Christ" comes very close to Gnostic understanding or comprehension, which places salvation within the control of the "knower" or "believer," as though it was a possession. In other words, one is saved by "knowing" and not by faith or believing. In the Gnostic and Fundamentalist view, movement is from the individual to the redeemer; the individual knows the redeemer. With orthodoxy and proto-orthodoxy, the emphasis is on the opposite end of the polarity; the Redeemer knows the individual. Bloom strikes at the heart of the issue: "The most aggressive of Protestantism is no Protestantism at all but a pure out-flaring again of an ancient Gnosis. The Jesus who is sought is already both principle and particle in the soul that seeks him."²²

In Gnosticism, "the concentration on self is a natural result of the passionate need to escape the world . . . an escape by withdrawal into the self."²³ Lee draws similarities between Gnosticism and Narcissism. The latter is based upon the beautiful boy, Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool. He was unable to break away from what he saw and thus atrophied and perished.

Gnosticism and Fundamentalism have a savior. The difference is that one saves from ignorance and the other from sin. Both save the individual from imprisonment in an alien material world or, as expressed earlier by Churton and Jonas, the machine. Gnostics do not look for salvation from sin but “from unconsciousness and incomprehension.”²⁴ In the Gospel of Thomas, knowledge rather than behavior is the basis of salvation. In Gnosticism, self-knowledge is the guiding principle. In Fundamentalism, knowledge of the Redeemer and self-knowledge are keys to salvation. The latter is a different kind of self-knowledge. The individual reflects inwardly upon guilt. A negative self-knowledge or self-awareness is created by illumination from divine light above, then outwardly upon the Redeemer, who must become known in a spiritual sense. The Gnostic says “I know my true self” and the Fundamentalist acclaims “I know Jesus.”²⁵ But this Jesus was capable of being known through the divine spirit.

Gnosticism is basically a return to salvation under the law. “The Gnostics believed that salvation must be earned. They believed the individual must make a science out of his own redemption.”²⁶ This also sounds very much like Scientology, where one works through a number of spiritual levels to attain the pure spiritual self through a process called “auditing.”²⁷

In Fundamentalism, one achieves salvation through personal decision.

This is not a divine act of pure grace and acceptance from above. This is conditional grace. One *must* accept, and “know,” Christ before salvation is possible. There is no other way. This is one of the results of dualism. Religions advocating their way is not only *the* way, but the *only* way, imply an either–or dualistic split in reality. This is Fundamentalism. It is Gnosticism.

DIVINE REDEEMER

The most significant similarity between the two religions, the keystone of both and the one upon which this book is predicated, is their concept of divine redeemer, the Anointed One, the Christ.²⁸ On the surface the two Redeemers appear quite different. The Gnostic Redeemer is all divine. The Fundamentalist Christ is divine, but he is also human. This concept is unthinkable to Gnostics. At a doctrinal level Protestant Fundamentalists state that “the Word became flesh.” In principle, their doctrine of Incarnation is orthodox, mainstream. But when we leave the airy heights of doctrine and descend into the hands-on domain of reality, particularly scriptural interpretation, does the Incarnation hold?

For proto-Orthodox, Orthodox, and mainstream Christianity, “The Word became flesh.” This is *the* fundamental upon which Christianity was founded and based. God became human “and made his dwelling among us” (John 1: 14). This is incarnational theology that destroys all dualism. Everything comes together in the person of Christ; all dissonant elements are united in His Being. This is *the* Incarnation, and any deviation from it was considered unorthodox or heretical. It was the major difference between Christian proto-orthodoxy and Christian

Gnosticism. The Gnostic Christians' redeemer was a phantomlike figure and only "appeared" to be human.

Doctrinally, Fundamentalists give a tacit cognitive (literal) nod to Christ's humanity. At deeper more visceral levels, with their near-obsessive need for inerrancy and purity, it is very difficult for them to conceive of *the Christ* as capable of doubt, fear, despair, sadness, depression, or loneliness, or to see him as human, of being compatible with sin . . . of being sin. They are much more comfortable with Luke's patient, serene, and resigned righteous martyr who, during his crucifixion from the cross, utters, "Father into your hands I commit my spirit" (23:46); as opposed to the hostile, lonely, despairing, and agitated Jesus of Mark who becomes "deeply distressed and troubled" (14:33); whose soul is "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (14:34); who asks his Father to "take this cup from me" (14:36); and who, eventually, from the cross, cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (15:34):²⁹ In short, for Fundamentalists, divinity dominates humanity.

This is the key similarity between Gnosticism and Fundamentalism. Their redeemers never achieve humanity; they never become flesh and blood. They never become real but evolve into fantasies and magic that many scholars argue is the Oriental mystical cradle from which Gnosticism came. It is easy to see how this type of one-sided Christology might affect one's approach to the Bible and scriptural interpretation. The Bible truly becomes the *divine*.

Is this overemphasis on the divine one of the reasons most Fundamental dominations have no creed, nothing that anchors their Redeemer, their Christ, in history? In their anti-intellectualism and inward focus on "getting saved" and being "born again," have they discarded history, including the Christ of history? Are they so focused on the inner experience that their interpretation of scripture is based solely on that spiritual connection? The scripture it interprets, predictably, is pure and untainted, a word that never becomes "flesh." Along this line of thinking, Harold Bloom asserts that "without the Real Presence of the body of Christ in a communion service, the Baptist is alone with his Bible."³⁰

MYSTICISM

In most normative Western religious traditions—Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, mainline Protestantism, Islam, Judaism—the key elements are institutional and supported by history and dogma. God is an external, transcendent Being. Some within these traditions bring the deity much closer. They profess an acquaintance or knowledge of a God who is not transcendent, but within. This internal God has been there before time. These are the mystics and visionaries. They are Gnostics. They are also Fundamentalists.

Gnostics and Fundamentalists have no intermediary. True knowledge comes through spiritual immediacy: "Like Baptists, Quakers and many others, the Gnostic is convinced that whoever receives the spirit communicates directly with the divine. One of Valentinus' students, the Gnostic teacher Heracleon (c. 160)

says ‘that at first, people believe because of the testimony of others . . .’ but then ‘they come to believe from the truth itself.’”³¹ In one Gnostic initiation ritual “after invoking the spirit,” the leader “commands the candidate to speak in prophecy, to demonstrate that the person has received direct contact with the divine.”³²

Both of these passages resonate with anyone who has attended a revival, tent meeting, or Quaker service. The spontaneous outpouring of emotion is evidence of a perception that some individuals have connected with the Almighty.³³ Unobstructed by rules of ritual and unimpeded by reason, the spirit moves freely. For Gnostics and Fundamentalists, the spirit truly does move where it will. Or does it?

Gnosticism and Fundamentalism are spirit-dominated religions. Central to both is the spiritual person and their view that humanity is divided between spirit and flesh. Spiritual in this sense does not mean communication with the dead, though elements of that are found in some fringe sects. The intended meaning is focused on the spirit existing within the body (the divine spark, “inner light”) and capable of ascending from that temporary residence.³⁴ This spirit is able to have direct and unfiltered communication with a Supreme Spirit. It is a form of divine communication necessary to the existence of Gnosticism and Fundamentalism. It is mysticism.

Webster’s definition of mysticism is “the doctrine that it is possible to achieve communion with God through contemplation and love without the medium of human reason; any doctrine that asserts the possibility of attaining knowledge of spiritual truths through intuition acquired by fixed meditation.”³⁵ A mystic is “one who professes to undergo mystical experiences by which he intuitively comprehends truths beyond human understanding.”³⁶

The word derives from the Greek *mustikos*, or “initiate,” as in initiate of the Eleusinian Mysteries and *musteria*, or “initiation.” In ancient mystery religions, from which Gnosticism partly sprang, the goal of the initiate was to achieve communion or conscious awareness with God. This was accomplished through direct experience, intuition, or insight, and included the belief that such experience was a source of knowledge and Wisdom. This achievement of consciousness with God was also one’s destiny.³⁷ Maintaining a relationship with mainstream religions, mystery religions often go into the esoteric beyond mainstream doctrine. Kabbalah is a mystical movement within Judaism, as is Sufism within Islam and Gnosticism within Christianity. Some argue Christianity is a mystic sect that arose from Judaism.

Mysticism has been examined and written about extensively. It is included in this discussion because of its dualistic nature, spiritualistic knowledge, the immediacy that knowledge is received by the “spiritual person,” and the weight of authority given the message because of the manner it was received. In mystical knowledge, finding God in yourself is equivalent to finding self-knowledge or achieving self-discovery. In essence, this is a conversion experience—Gnostic or Fundamentalist. One achieves, “Not only a spiritual state, but a state of mind.”³⁸

Mysticism presupposes dualism, the dichotomy of spirit and matter, severance of the spiritual from the physical.³⁹ It allows people to claim that special spiritual knowledge separates them from those lacking it. For Gnostics, this self-knowledge is illuminated by the God within and raises one from the imprisonment of ignorance and incomprehension. For the Fundamentalist, it is self-knowledge of guilt and need for repentance illuminated by the God (“divine spark”) within. This kind of spiritual knowledge raises one from the bondage of sin but also from the physical bondage of death. The content of the two approaches is different; the dynamics are virtually identical.

Fundamentalists vehemently deny they believe in human possession of a “divine spark.” Behaviorally, however, their actions are contradictory. They do believe there is an ignition within the human spirit, an ignition not caused by the human spirit. The process presupposes a point of divine contact. The contact occurs in such manner, and with such spiritual force for them, it is undeniable. This is the mystical element, the spiritual immediacy that makes the receiver of the message or illumination one with the Messenger or Illuminator. This is the drawn line between insiders and outsiders, the relegation of faithful into inner and outer circles. It is clearly dualism. The consequences are divisiveness, separation: “As in the Fourth Gospel, recognition and knowing the true identity of the revealer separate the elect from the rest of humanity. . . . Without the knowledge that leads the believer to a spiritual identification with the revealer, cultic actions have no effect.”⁴⁰

The “born again,” second birth phenomenon in America (and transported abroad) is an example of the intimation of divinity. It is present in most American Fundamentalism. Mormon Founder, Joseph Smith, ranks in the category with the great visionaries of Christian mystics, Kabbalists, and Islamic Sufi. It is argued by some that when Smith replaced monism with polytheism, every Mormon became a little god. Pentecostals, Assembly of God, and Seventh-day Adventists belong in this tradition. The distance between God and humanity is lessened, in some cases obliterated all together. In the words of Gilbert Keith Chesterton: “That Jones shall worship the god within him turns out ultimately to mean that Jones shall worship Jones.”⁴¹ Therefore, the spirit moves where Jones chooses for it to move.

INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—nothing more nor less.”

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

Everything we read must be interpreted. Otherwise, words are just words. A society where one learns that the words in the Bible are infallible, without error, and were not to be challenged eliminates the possibility of interpretation. “To everything there is a season,” cites the preacher of Ecclesiastes. In view of the multitude of translations and interpretations, he might well have written “For every word

there is an interpretation.” Different branches, sects, and denominations of Christianity abound and with them come innumerable interpretations of texts.

How do people come up with their interpretations? One of the boldest, and most succinct, statements regarding how people interpret texts has been recently made by Dr. Bart D. Ehrman. In his book *Misquoting Jesus, The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, he writes,

Reading a text necessarily involves interpreting a text. . . . [T]exts do not speak for themselves. If texts could speak for themselves, then everyone honestly and openly reading a text would agree on what the text says. . . . Texts are interpreted, and they are interpreted (just as they were written) by living, breathing human beings, who can make sense of the texts only by explaining them in light of their other knowledge, explicating their meaning, putting the words of the text “in other words.” . . . The only way to make sense of a text is to read it, and the only way to read it is by putting it in other words, and the only way to put it in other words is by having other words to put it into, and the only way to have other words to put it into is that you have a life, and the only way that you have a life is by being filled with desires, longings, needs, wants, beliefs, perspectives, worldviews, opinions, likes, dislikes—and all other things that make human beings human. And so to read a text is, necessarily, to change a text.⁴²

Ehrman goes on to describe how the scribes of the New Testament literally put the words “in other words.”

Mystical knowledge also applies to the interpretation of scripture. Upon reading holy texts and receiving revelations from them, the mystic attributes the source of the revelation to an internal experience.⁴³ “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” becomes “the revelation is in the internal experience of the reader.”

This mystical methodology leads not only to a highly subjective interpretation of scripture but also, ultimately, to solipsism—a philosophical term meaning that only the individual exists, all else is illusion. Religious viewpoints of this type abound in Gnosticism and Fundamentalism. There is no central authority, no universal guiding principle or set of principles. Interpretation of the Word of God is democratized to a point that some contend interpretational anarchy reigns: “No one can tell the free soul how to interpret the Bible, or how not to interpret it. The doctrine destroys Fundamentalism by sanctioning endless interpretative possibilities so that the weird metaphor of a ‘literal’ or ‘inerrant’ reading totally vaporizes.”⁴⁴ The early Church fathers saw the implications of this logic. Its impact on the young Church could affect attempts to establish authority. Besides the unrealized eschaton (last day), this may be another reason for the more rapid development of organization and hierarchy.

Though the Roman Catholic Church is a broad tent and mystics dwell within its theological drip-line, Catholicism represents the opposite of subjective ideology. Word and tradition are authoritative. Dissenters are quickly brought into line or excommunicated. No atmosphere is allowed for fragmentation of doctrine or scriptural interpretation, deviation from the orthodox, or “correct teaching”⁴⁵: “since the death of the apostles, believers accept the word of the

priests and bishops, who have claimed, from the second century, to be their only legitimate heirs."⁴⁶

Fundamentalists, on the other hand, reject this linear succession of spiritual power. In that respect, they are descendants of the Gnostics, where the divine word has meaning only within a personal, subjective context. For Gnostics, and Fundamentalists, true revelation is unavailable to outsiders. Gnostics and Fundamentalists apply this principle to the interpretation of scripture. For Gnostics, comprehending the true Scriptures was very important, but it was not easy. *Gnosis* involved not only comprehending the true Scripture but also the comprehension had to be an understanding of the *hidden* teachings within the scripture. Embedded in the Scripture were secret messages that only "The Knowers" could decipher. These secret messages were accessible to the *pneumatics*, not the more literal-minded *psychics*. This accessibility to hidden, secret messages is mysticism.

Fundamentalists, whether Christian, Islamic, or Hindu, tend to read and interpret texts selectively. Because they are spirit-led, which each of the major religions interpret differently, the text can mean whatever they determine it to mean. Context, which also means history, is crucial to understanding and interpreting any textual passage. But with mystical methodology, it was never part of the interpretive equation.

The Gnostic *pneumatics* operate on a pure spiritual plane with no intermediaries required. A conduit, immediacy of communication, connects them with the deity. Special knowledge was assessable only to the initiated,⁴⁷ the saved, who had direct access to God without going through any bishop or priest. This allowed them freedom to interpret scripture as they chose and often through the slippery filter of symbolism, something they accused the apologists of doing. Origen, in particular, was targeted. The Gnostic *psychics*, however, who exist between the spiritual and physical worlds, attain salvation through good conduct, observing the law and a literal interpretation of scriptures. The *hylics*, or earthly ones, are a lost cause. Within the Gnostic camp there were literalists, such as Marcion, and those who interpreted using allegory, such as Valentinus. Because of the underlying subjective process, there was no universal Gnostic method of interpreting scripture. To the early Church fathers, it became imperative they all fall.

On the issue of scriptural interpretation, Fundamentalists are clear and, for the most part, united. Holy Scripture is inerrant and to be interpreted literally. This is their authority: the unerring word. Between Genesis 1:1 and Revelation 22:21 are instructions for righteous living and salvation. One need only read and follow. This works also for authoritarian religions, only the interpretation filters downward from a hierarchical apex. The spirit moves only one way from one source.

But Fundamentalists operate on a democratized, subjective plane of spiritual immediacy, which ultimately results in no authority, that is, anarchy. It is not unusual to find a touch of magic in this concept of spiritual immediacy. Not only can scripture be interpreted by any one who is spirit-filled but also the physical bound Bible itself assumes a seductive aura. After imbuing it with godlike purity, "what is left is the Bible as physical object, limp and leather, a final icon or

magical talisman."⁴⁸ Individuals with problems need only open the Bible and the first words their eyes encounter will offer guidance, solace, and address the solution. Interpretation becomes based upon the movement of the spirit at any given moment and in any given circumstance.⁴⁹

The implications of a literal interpretation of an inerrant Word of God are far-reaching. They go to the heart of the Incarnation. Gnostics and Fundamentalists uphold spiritual *and* literal interpretations. Spiritual means spiritual immediacy, movement of spirit without reality orientation, without context, as required by objective interpretation. Literal means "following exactly the wording of the original, but also as 'matter-of-fact . . . restricted to the facts.'"⁵⁰ When the Fundamentalists state that the Bible is the literal "Word of God," they mean a literalness uncorrupted by reality, one that is spiritually pure. This is a purely Gnostic concept.

Because of this dichotomy of spirit and flesh, the word does not become real in an incarnational, matter-of-fact "crucified, dead, and buried" sense presented by Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and the early Church fathers. To the Fundamentalists, the Word is analogous to the pure spiritual Gnostic Christ, Docetic, or Separationist, who takes on the "appearance" of humanness but never becomes flesh and blood. This Christ is perfect in every way. In fact, the Gnostics expunged, or significantly edited, those passages referring to Christ's humanity (in the process violating their own literalism) when using Christian texts for their own purposes.⁵¹ Therefore, by disavowing the human dimension, the Word of Fundamental theology does not, and cannot, become flesh.

Fundamentalism and Gnosticism hold no exclusive claim to an inerrant and infallible word. In 1854 the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception became the first such Roman Catholic proclamation. This was seen by many as a test case for the doctrine of papal infallibility, which followed in 1870. There are currently only three infallible doctrines in Catholicism. The third is the Assumption of Mary proclaimed in 1950. By "infallible" Catholics mean something that is affirmed only in relation to faith and doctrine. The principle is expressed by the Vatican Council in its efforts as guardians of the faith, a right they possess by divine authority. The Pope cannot merely speak and his statement be declared infallible. A doctrine becomes officially infallible only when the Pope makes the declaration *ex cathedra*, that is, while on the papal throne, in the seat of Peter.

It was no coincidence that Fundamentalist and Catholic doctrines of infallibility emerged within the same time frame. The Industrial Revolution was full throttle and modernity was making its initial assaults on traditional religion: "It remained for modern Catholicism, in erecting the bulwarks against modernity, to articulate the method of harmonizing tradition. The infallibility of the pope provides the church with a living tradition."⁵² Roman Catholicism, however, does not hold the written scriptures to be infallible: "The Bible does not claim to be the sole authority of the church. . . . The authority of Scripture is not the authority of a naked book, but the authority of a book in process of being interpreted. Tradition is that by which Scripture is continually being interpreted. Therefore,

the Council of Trent puts the authority of tradition on the same level with the authority of Scripture.”⁵³

VIEW OF THE CHURCH

Dualistic theology conceives dualistic cosmogony, which produces dualistic humanity, which generates dualistic community: outsiders versus insiders. “We might speak of ‘exclusionists’ and ‘inclusionists’ because Conservative Christians, unlike liberal Christians, tend to define the word Christian to exclude others—except their fellow conservative Christians.”⁵⁴ The Gnostics did likewise. The Gnostic community was seen as a “secure zone of the spirit. . . . Its holiness is assured by divine action.”⁵⁵ In other words, individual elitism becomes communal elitism. An individual who is “saved” belongs only to a like community of “saved” and together they form, as with the Gnostics of old, a “secure zone of the spirit.” An individual is set against the unsaved who exist outside the circle: “The strongly docetic cast of Gnostic myth suggests a communal sense of separation from the larger social world.”⁵⁶

The elitist feature of Gnosticism may have represented the greatest danger to the early Church. Elitism, characteristic of its inherent dualism, is divisive. Groups and congregations splinter into factions. True believers are saved and belong on a higher spiritual plane, while the others are damned and relegated to a lower level. To combat this type of divisiveness, the early apologists chastised those who bragged of their own knowledge and spirituality, while disparaging that of others. Christian Gnostics often quoted Paul in their appeals: “For God does not show favoritism” (Romans 2:11). “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. . . . There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one” (Galatians 3:26-28). “If I have the gift of prophesy . . . and all knowledge . . . but have not love, I am nothing” (I Corinthians 13: 1-2).

The turn Calvinism took in the new world created a “spiritual aristocracy” in New England.⁵⁷ During the great surge of revivalism those adhering to the “born again” concept were branded as “unconverted.” For the elitist Old Lights one conversion, the first, was enough.

In terms of communal structure within the circle of saved, the Gnostics, consistent with their strong emphasis upon the individual, “had no interest in an ecclesiastical system . . . the value lay in the soul experience.”⁵⁸ Hall agrees: “As is usual with philosophical groups, the Gnostics were individualists and opposed to any intense program of organization.”⁵⁹ All of this blends with the Gnostic theory of immediate, mystical communication with the divine. Due to its essence—spontaneous, charismatic, open, free-flowing—this theory cannot fit any structure of authority and institutional framework. Gnosticism encourages insubordination to clerical authority.

Fundamentalists resist church hierarchy. Martin Luther had problems with Catholic hierarchy and its theology. It is the nature of spontaneous charisma to be at odds with a structure of authority. Radical democracy and egalitarian politics

are more closely associated with Fundamental movements. The American Revolution was fueled by the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s, with its emphasis on individuality, personal emotion, and detachment from ritual and ceremony. It also forged an individual freethinking firebrand named Patrick Henry.⁶⁰

Based upon research available, the earliest Gnostic congregations were loosely organized along the principle of radical equality, the concept "priesthood of all believers" taken to its logical conclusion. The structure of authority was not vertical but horizontal. Individuals drew lots for clerical and priestly functions. There was no acknowledgment of distinctions. Various roles within the congregation rotated. One might read a scripture one service and lead hymns the next. Members participated equally in the government of the congregation or group. Matters at hand were left to casting lots: "They believed that since God directs everything in the universe, the way the lots fell expressed his choice."⁶¹

Though Fundamental church governments and congregations are not as egalitarian, the same principles apply. Compared to mainstream Christianity, the Fundamentalist mind is suspicious of hierarchy and organization along vertical lines. This characteristic is more evident in Quaker than Southern Baptist churches. Despite their protests against vertical organization, Baptists are more organized in that manner than some mainstream Protestant denominations. Fundamental denominations today are the by-product of the First and Second Great Awakenings. President George W. Bush clearly understands this hereditary linkage. It is arguably the reason for his election and the reason he returned to that segment of the populace in September of 2006 when he called for a Third Great Awakening in the battle against the forces of evil.

In their excessive emphasis on spiritual experience and rejection of materiality, Gnosticism and Fundamentalism have little use for the sacraments. The minimizing of sacraments with Fundamentalism may be related more to logistics than ideology. The sacramental utensils would not easily fit in the saddle bags of circuit riders and the distance between churches precluded frequent use of sacraments. This is one of the reasons Methodists today celebrate Holy Communion once a month, whereas their founder, John Wesley celebrated the sacrament two to three times a week. The emphasis of Gnosticism and Fundamentalism is on the individual experience, not outward participation in sacraments. The most significant event to occur at the altar or altar rail during the two Great Awakenings was not sacramental. It was the emotional experience of being born again: "It is significant that in the doctrinal tests so important to American fundamentalists for distinguishing between authentic Christianity and liberal heresy, the sacraments are never mentioned."⁶²

Another commonality was their effects upon the established religions of their time. Gnosticism's impact upon the early Church differs from the impact of Fundamentalism upon mainstream Christianity in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Stanley Hall made this observation: "mysticism, because it is entirely an internal individual experience, worked a serious hardship upon formal religious organizations. If man's search for truth is inward to a spiritual core within

himself, then formalized religions with their vast followings become comparatively inconsequential.⁶³ In short, Gnosticism and Fundamentalism create havoc for organized religion.

VIEW OF TIME AND HISTORY

Gnosticism and Fundamentalism, by their dualistic nature, are apocalyptic. With all apocalyptic theology, the theme is that the best is yet to be and destined to occur at the *eschaton*, or end of time. At that time, the evil powers of this earth will be defeated by the Divine Redeemer; the spiritual heavenly powers and a new eternal age will be ushered in. "Gnostics revolt against time. . . . The Gnostic hope is not that the clock will keep ticking, but that it will be mercifully stopped."⁶⁴

Early American Fundamentalism had a similar philosophy. It was a hard, harsh world and the best was yet to be. Time is bifurcated, compartmentalized into a mythical past and future. Dualism again prevails. Gnostics and Fundamentalists have a problem with the present. The present is viewed as bad news that is getting no better, and it requires dealing with and facing this worldly reality. Gnosticism and Fundamentalism, by default (dualism again), are more otherworldly in their focus.

In its earliest stages, American Christianity was a religion of escapism that denied history. The only time worthy of focus was the eschaton, the last day. This was a day of harsh judgment but one of glory for the elect. One example of this in American homegrown religion is the Jehovah's Witnesses. For this religious group, the end of time came in 1975 at the completion of six thousands years of existence. Due to their extreme elitism, the rapture for Jehovah's Witnesses is not the rapture for everyone else. When the world did not end in 1843–45 according to the Millerite⁶⁵ expectation, the Seventh-day Adventists were born. The Mormons, who share similar apocalyptic leanings, fiercely believe Christ will come again and the New Jerusalem will be built on American soil. Little wonder America has been called "the most apocalyptic of nations."⁶⁶ All of these homegrown American original religions are Gnostic.

Gnosticism drew heavily from Jewish Apocalypticism. Fundamentalists draw heavily from the New Testament where Jesus is portrayed as a Jewish apocalyptic figure. The earliest doctrinal form of apocalypticism emerged in the 1800s with John Nelson Darby's (1800–1882)⁶⁷ doctrine of the Rapture where he combined a variety of passages in the New Testament, including Revelation. But the key scripture was 1 Thessalonians 4:15–18:

According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage others with these words.

Cyrus Scofield popularized Darby's Rapture doctrine in his *Scofield Reference Bible* where the theme was promoted as Fundamentalism. From that seed it began to grow. More recently, this theological viewpoint found renewed popularity in the 1970s with Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* and Tim Lahaye's *Left Behind* series. It is ironic that "American Christian Fundamentalism, and the Islamic Shi'ite fundamentalism of Iran are rival heirs of Zoroastrian imaginings of the Last Things."⁶⁸

MORALITY

Individual salvation, a key tenet of Gnosticism and Fundamentalism, tends to exclude a sense of community and communal responsibility. The same is true toward the world of nature and the natural order: "The Gnostic initiate was taught to acknowledge no responsibility. His ethic was to be one of complete freedom from any constraint or any obligation towards society and government regarding which he entertained the most pessimistic opinions. The world was in the iron control of evil powers."⁶⁹ Individual salvation shifts focus from Jesus's political ideal of bringing the kingdom into this world to the inner spirit or "divine spark." The welfare of the social order is ignored. Conversion is wholly inward. The experience of "knowing" Jesus is solitary and takes priority over corporate worship or social outreach.

This emphasis translates into an inner circle of believers versus an outer circle of unbelievers and, in turn, translates into a theology of communal elitist salvation versus the rest of the world. These are not underlying attitudes that promote social welfare and reform. Morality becomes an individual matter. Overtly expressed in Fundamentalism and directly associated with Gnosticism, this form of dualism is reflected in escape from the physical, that is, the physical body. Gnostics and Fundamentalists maintained a deep distrust of the body and its functions. This view led Gnostics to a docetic interpretation of Christ. It led the Fundamentalists to one that, if not docetic, is otherworldly and spiritually detached.

New England theologians took dualism and expanded it to its logical limits. Pleasure was wrong. Sex was wrong. "Urination and defecation were daily reminders of the inner corruption of human nature."⁷⁰ The emphasis was upon denial of pleasure. To engage in pleasure meant contamination of the spiritual self with the physical body, a mindset and practice followed by the ancient ascetic Gnostics. Sins of the flesh, or sexuality, have held center stage in American revivalism throughout the past century and into the twenty-first century. The dualistic split rears its head once again. Fundamentalists of this generation, and the Gnostics of old, are unable to accept sex as a gift from the Creator. They are unable to bring a theology of incarnation home to the human body.

Gnostic writings emphasize control over individual passions. So do Paul, John, and other New Testament writers. This is a common theme throughout Christianity, particularly in the monastic movements where a similar dualism surfaces. This puritanical theme is present in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.

Some conservative denominations, such as the Mennonites and Amish, enforce dress codes in support of purity. Fundamentalist Muslim countries have passed laws requiring a woman to wear a *hijab*, the traditional public headdress for Muslim women. It is illegal for women to wear dresses that show their legs or high heel shoes considered capable of sexual arousal.⁷¹ There are other reasons unrelated to religious preference for these social prohibitions, but they stem from that basic driving principal: dualism where two forces comprise reality and battle relentlessly for its heart and soul.

Asceticism and self-denial are persistent and ongoing subjects in Christianity. Though probably not created by Gnosticism, both Gnosticism and Christianity have absorbed these characteristics from other sources and appropriated them to their own theological ends. Strict asceticism, separation from the material world, leads to knowledge of God. Whether the Essenes belonged to this school is still in question.

With Asceticism, dualism again is the dominant underlying factor. The Gnostics, “who ridiculed the idea of bodily resurrection frequently devalued the body, and considered its actions (sexual acts, for example) unimportant to the spiritual person.”⁷² “Because nothing is quite so earthy as sexuality, it is not hard to understand why the Gnostics did everything they could to interpret Holy Writ in an anti-sexual way.”⁷³ With their attention on the spiritual world and away from the physical, Gnostics are more interested in living in the hereafter and escaping the entanglements of this world. This is reflected in two different types of Gnosticism: the puritanical and the licentious. The former denies the physical world of pleasure to become associated with the spiritual world; the latter focuses so totally on the afterlife-to-come that the present physical world has an ineffectual, powerless neutral quality, which is impotent. For that reason it can be enjoyed.

The one gospel that approximates Gnosticism, The Gospel According to John, lacks emphasis on ethics. As noted earlier, the command to “love one another” appears only at the last supper (John 13:34–35) “and is clearly directed inward toward those in the cultic community, (community of insiders) not outward toward others. . . . The Fourth Gospel has internalized the ‘light’ so that it points to the revealer himself, not God’s righteousness or a way of life.”⁷⁴ Perkins continues: “Reinforcing the solidarity of those who hear the word of revelation emerges as the primary ethical functions of discourses of the revealer in both the Gnostic and the Johannine tradition.”⁷⁵ The sheep parables and images in the Gospel of Truth equate salvation to possessing insight.⁷⁶ Some Gnostics did, however, have a proselytizing component and emphasized “the necessity of expanding the call to salvation to those who are not among the elect.”⁷⁷

There is evidence in historical documents of Gnostic missionary activity. The Gnostic organization, if it could be called that, was basically a loose and wide expansion of cells, or groups, without central administration. Individual schools fragmented into various branches. One element of cohesiveness detected by scholars was that of traveling laity, missionaries traveling from the centers of learning—Alexandria, Rome, and Jerusalem—fanning out with propaganda

about their religion. Similar activity is seen in the Christian Church with the travels of Paul and his coterie.⁷⁸ The difference, however, between Paul and Gnostic missionaries was in the message. His possessed a love ethic that focused outward. The Gnostic message focused inward on knowledge of the inner self. Paul's message was one of salvation from sin; the Gnostics, salvation from ignorance, "*mea culpa* having been replaced by *mea ignorantia*" so that "the function of the Gospel becomes solely that of enlightening the soul concerning what has previously been hidden."⁷⁹ This is far a field from any social gospel.

The implication of dualism for social ethics is profound. Matter and worldly objects are considered evil or part of the domain of all that is evil. Nature and environmental concerns are abandoned: "For when a person is able to accept the Gnostic vision, all temporal concerns are left behind: unemployment, North-South relations, East-West conflicts, the polluting of the oceans and atmosphere, the possibility of human error creating a man-made hell."⁸⁰ This type of extreme individualism and hyperspiritualism is unlikely to join forces to implement gun control, Medicare, nuclear disarmament, and environmental responsibility.⁸¹ Granted, some Fundamentalist denominations have successful mission programs, but missions stop there. Their natural inward-looking conservatism precludes any support for larger social issues, with possibly two exceptions: antiabortion and pro-death penalty movements, the former pro-life, the latter pro-law and order. Pro-life seems to be an issue for doctrinal, not social, reasons. The death penalty, or law and order, seems on the surface a social issue with an underlying concern for self-protection. The key word is "self" as opposed to "others" and "community."

RELIGIONS OF ESCAPISM

Perhaps one word accurately sums up the similarities of these two religious expressions: escape. In the final analysis, both are designed to escape reality. Their dualistic rejection of the world and spiritual inward focus result in withdrawal, not only from the world but also from other human beings. Ultimately, Gnosticism and Fundamentalism are religions of isolation.

The psychological implications of Gnosticism and Fundamentalism will be expanded below in Chapter 11, but a brief precursory comment follows here. When faced with danger, the human body has two instinctive reactions: fight or flight. It has been called by psychologists, the "fight-flight stress response syndrome." Historically, the Church has often chosen to stand and fight. St. Paul is clear on this issue: "But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet" (1 Thessalonians 5:8). Though Pauline authorship of Ephesians is questionable for some, there is a similar call to "put on the full armor of God. . . . Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this take up the shield of faith . . . the helmet

of salvation and the sword of the spirit which is the word of God" (6:11–17). None of this equipage was made for the back. There are other metaphors in the Bible with which the reader is familiar. They abound in the Old Testament.

When the battle becomes a siege that turns into a continuous war, people typically react by fleeing if faced with overwhelming odds that instill despair. This is true of the religions that developed out of sieges or their perception of sieges. Gnostic, dualist elements did not find their way into Jewish theology in the times of power and prosperity but rather in the days of captivity (Babylon) and subjugation (Hellenistic rulers—Antiochus Epiphanes IV).

John Calvin, the fountainhead of most of American Fundamentalism, did not flinch from engagement with the opposition. He encouraged his followers to be active and bold, but his American disciples felt overpowered, beaten. The pioneers of colonial America cried for deliverance much in the way the Hebrews did in captivity: "How long can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land" (Psalm 137:4)? They did not want to sing the song forever: "Their escape route . . . was mapped by the New England theology . . . and remains today the prevailing way of one strong segment of American Protestantism."⁸² The sign along the route pointed the way: "Be Born Again." It was the same for the early Gnostics, a failure of nerve, "a demand for something clear and dogmatic which explained the universe, and for an assured hope in immortality."⁸³

SUMMARY

Separated by two millennia, Gnosticism and Fundamentalism emerged from similar matrices of similar underlying sociological, cultural, and psychological makeup. In the Roman Empire as well as the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, individuals felt dehumanized and trapped in a network of imperial machinery, overwhelmed by an influx of migrants from surrounding cultures (primarily Africa and the Orient) and bored with institutionalized religions that previously had brought some semblance of comfort and hope. In their effort to reclaim that optimism amidst the drudgery of their everyday lives, many in their search found it in Gnosticism and Fundamentalism.

Both of these religious expressions are diverse and fragmented, broken into numerous manifestations. Yet in their diversity they incorporate unifying underlying philosophical concepts, which color much of their doctrines. In Gnosticism this unifying principle is seen most clearly in dualism and a radical split between spirit and matter, good and evil, light and dark, God and Satan, the saved and the unsaved, and so on. In Fundamentalism the basic tenets are expressed in the "Five Fundamentals": inerrancy of scripture, the virgin birth, substitutional atonement, bodily resurrection, and historicity of miracles.

The similarities between Gnosticism, particularly Christian Gnosticism, and Fundamentalism spin off from the core dualism of spirit and matter. In this dualistic worldview, everything divided simplistically between the spiritual and physical; the spirit is good, the flesh is evil. The polarity of these forces is present

throughout the New Testament, most prominently in the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul. Through the theological eyes of these writers, dualism collapsed into the singular event of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ; the Word became flesh, God became human. Within Gnosticism and Fundamentalism, this incarnational balance of spirit and flesh is obliterated. The humanness of Christ and his Word is eclipsed by an overemphasis upon his spiritual, divine nature.

Though clearly evidenced in Gnosticism, this radical cleavage of reality is not as obvious in Fundamentalism. It is neither stated in the "Five Fundamentals" nor clearly outlined in any early conservative religious writings. But an emphasis on the spirit-filled life and sin-filled flesh implies this dichotomy. The dualistic worldview of the two religious movements yields a dualistic view of humanity. Humans are divided between spirit and flesh. Dualism is implied in the "Five Fundamentals" where Christ never fully becomes human or incorporates flesh. Theoretically, his humanity is verbalized, but in practice he is divine, wholly spirit.

Dualism is evidenced in the similarity between the Gnostic inner "divine spark" and the Fundamental concept of inner spirit of inner light. Both share an immediacy of contact with the Divine and are highly individualistic. This extends into the similar manner Gnosticism and Fundamentalism employ an inerrant, literal interpretation of scripture. Holy writ is interpreted in a subjective mystical manner. Revelation becomes an internal experience of the believer rather than through a channel of ecclesiastical authority. Sensing the impact of this individualism upon the existence of the authority of their fledgling religion, the early Church fathers were energized into literary challenge and organizational activism. A literal inerrant interpretation of scripture has far reaching implications and goes to the heart of Christ's Incarnation. A spiritually pure, literal, and inerrant interpretation precludes any aspect of humanity to the Word made flesh. This is a major problem for Fundamentalism today as reflected in their Christology.

Gnosticism and Fundamentalism understand salvation as individual-centered. Knowledge is a key component. Individuals "know" their Redeemer. Though they differ in the type of knowledge implied, the process is similar. Salvation must be earned. Superficially, their respective Redeemers seem different, but in actuality they are similar. Both are heavily overendowed with spirit. The Word never truly becomes flesh.

On an organizational level Gnostic and Fundamental churches are similar. Both embrace elitist "insiders," while the remainder of unsaved humanity exists "outside the flock." Both are democratic, though of varying intensity, and eschew a hierarchical chain of command. Gnostic congregations were more loosely organized than those of current Fundamentalism were, but they operated along similar lines of communal elitism. They were spirit endowed, which distinguished them as carriers and interpreters of a divine message.

Morally and ethically, the individual took precedence over the community. The focus was on individual, not communal, salvation. This translates into an inner circle of faithful versus an excluded group of nonbelievers. Dualism again determined ethical behavior. Denial of pleasure became the central rule. The

spiritual self must not become contaminated by the physical world. Despite some early sources charging the Gnostics with licentious behavior, Puritan, Fundamentalist practice was in lockstep with some ascetical forms of Gnosticism. This practice is also seen in the ancient Essenes and early Christian monastic movements. Emphasis upon individual spiritual salvation over the concerns of others and the physical world has significant implications for contemporary Fundamentalism. Nature and the environment, along with other global issues, such as nuclear proliferation and disarmament, war, and peace, are abandoned at the expense of individual salvation.

In their understanding of time, Gnostics and Fundamentalists look to a golden past to which they expect to return when the forces of evil are defeated by the forces of good. They are apocalyptic. Morality was an individual matter with limited emphasis upon a social gospel. Though their means differ, both have a sense of mission: Gnostics strive to eradicate ignorance, while Fundamentalists work to wipe out sin.

Finally, both Fundamentalism and Gnosticism are religions of escape and isolation. This follows logically from their dualistic interpretation of reality and their emphasis upon individual salvation.