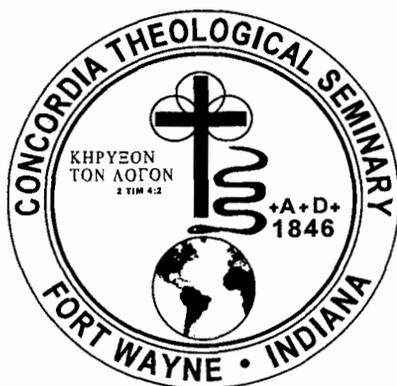


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Sectarian Apocalypticism in Mainline Christianity

Larry Nichols

Apocalypticism has played an important role in the way that many cults and sects have thought, taught, written, and wrangled about things eschatological. Whether it be Millerites or Mormons, the Watchtower or Waco, the People's Temple of Jonestown, or Heaven's Gate in California, the theme of the coming Apocalypse has been the *leitmotif* that has roused and animated the fervent spirits of sundry portentous prophetic gurus who, like roosters, crow out into the millennial dawn, rousing their willing herds of devoted followers.

The title of this paper, however, is "Sectarian Apocalypticism in Mainline Christianity." A closer look at the history of apocalypticism and/or millennialism reveals only too well that the cults are simply biting from the (usually Protestant) hand that feeds them. Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916), the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, had both Presbyterian and Congregational roots. Joseph Smith's (1805-1844) family decided that they were Presbyterians, even though the young Smith himself was not predestined to remain one. Calvinists also bear the responsibility for the back door loss of Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910), the plagiarizing founder of Christian Science.

The goal of this paper is to examine briefly apocalypticism's checkered history in the modern period and, in particular, significant developments of the nineteenth century, as well as the current millennial ravings at the end of the twentieth century. Second, we will be alluding to millennialism as often, if not more frequently, than apocalypticism. Millennialism provides the theological, historical, and philosophical contexts through which apocalypticism must be understood. Many sects that conclude that the end of the world is immanent are invariably in search of a millennial utopia to follow. We will explore this in its secular, sacred, political, and religious domains. This paper will argue that millennialism is philosophically rooted in Gnosticism. The Gnostic quest for an anthropocentric utopia has shaped numerous religious and secular eschatologies throughout history, and is certainly the underlying

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foundation of current mainline and Evangelical Protestant Christian thought. Gnosticism has ultimately led to postmodernism, and postmodernism has proven to be Gnosticism's Achilles' heel. Finally, a modest proposal will be made concerning how the church may counter apocalyptic and millennial claims through an apologetics that is consistently Trinitarian, catholic, evangelical (in the best sense), Christocentric, incarnational, ecclesiological, and sacramental.

A Brief History of Millennialism in Modern Christianity

The middle of the eighteenth century marks a time of renewed apocalyptic and millennial activities. Bengel's *Commentary on Revelation* (1740) renewed interest in the study of the Book of Revelation, particularly in pietistic churches. Millennialism was certainly a popular theme at this time in theosophical circles.

Then came the nineteenth century. Perhaps the Romantic era was the most visionary and utopic period in history. Religious visionaries imagined new ways to read the Bible and seek solace in a coming and future kingdom. In 1832, Edward Irving (1792-1834) and his Catholic Apostolic Church imagined the close proximity of a heavenly world and the return of Christ to establish it. John Nelson Darby, founder of the Plymouth Brethren (1847), spearheaded the dispensationalist interpretation of the Bible. His ideas caught on like wildfire in America, particularly in revivalist meetings and amongst itinerant frontier evangelists. Apparently, however, Darby was not the originator of the idea of a pre-tribulation rapture. Both he and Irving were inspired by a woman named Margaret MacDonald, who reported a revelation given her by God during a healing service in Port Glasgow, Scotland in 1830. MacDonald reported in her vision that there was a two-stage process to the Second Coming of Christ. This idea was embraced by both Darby and Irving and was destined for much fuller development in many of the Bible Schools (Moody, Fuller, Dallas, and others) during the twentieth century in the United States.¹

¹A good study of the history of the origin of the pre-tribulation rapture theory is

America was and is the land of unbridled freedom of religious expression. No small amount of millennial fervor preoccupied those who had come from Europe to seek it. In Salt Lake City, Utah, Brigham Young (1801–1877) led the band of Mormons and declared the Salt Lake Valley to be the new “Zion in the Wilderness.” Mormonism, of course, is one of the most influential of homegrown religions in the world. “If there was ever a story tantamount to the quintessential American melodrama, it is the story of the Mormon Church. That it is an interesting story is beyond doubt. That it is a significant story is beyond question. That it developed into what it is today is for many, beyond belief.”²

Perhaps the most notable and significant American nineteenth century millennial marvel was William Miller (1742–1849). In 1836, Miller, a farmer from Low Hampton, New York, published his *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ*. Possessing no formal theological training, Miller declared that he had unraveled the mysteries of Daniel and Revelation and pinpointed 1843 as the sure year for the return of Christ. In January of 1843, Miller became more specific, announcing that the year between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844 would be the time of the end. When March 21 came and went, Miller’s disappointment was temporarily postponed when one of his followers pointed out that according to Habakkuk 2:3, Miller had forgotten to take into account the need for a “tarrying time” of seven months and ten days. This brought the new date to October 22, 1844. The amount of pamphleteering, the excitement, the press coverage, and the large following surrounding Miller was simply amazing. When 1844 came and went, with no Apocalypse, there was utter disillusionment, anger, and many abandoned Miller’s movement. This is known in American religious history as the Great Disappointment.³ Those that remained would later be banded together as Seventh Day Adventists, led by Ellen G. White (1827–1815). White told the remaining remnant that Miller had failed because he did not teach a proper observance of the Sabbath day.⁴

Dave MacPherson’s *The Incredible Cover-Up: The True Story of the Pre-trib Rapture* (Plainfield, New Jersey: Logos International, 1975).

²George Mather and Larry Nichols, *Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religions, and the Occult* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 186.

³One may see Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan Butler, editors, *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987).

⁴Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1981),

Darwinism, Freudianism, speculative idealism, Marxism, and the advent of biblical criticism, all fertile activities of the nineteenth century European mind, paved the way for many to turn their backs on religious forms of utopia and the abandonment of a religious milieu for the quest for the better world. Apocalyptic fears and millennial hopes were recast from the sacred to various secular paradigms amongst the learned and the cultured despisers of religion.

Protestant liberals in the nineteenth century tried to retain a reworked religious version of Christianity. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) relocated the essence of Christianity from the head to the heart and summarized Christianity as a "feeling of absolute dependence." Later in the nineteenth century, Adolph von Harnack (1851-1930) proffered that the essence of Christianity did not lie in its old-world "husk," namely its eschatological context. The utopic vision for Christianity is the removal of the old husk so as to get at the kernel. For Harnack and the older Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889), and liberal theology in general at the close of the nineteenth century, this kernel was Christianity's "value" to culture in its excellent program of ethics and morality. In Harnack's view, part of the old husk was, in essence, a Christianity stripped of any of the old orthodoxy's claims altogether. "The history of the church has shown us that it was necessary that 'primitive Christianity' had to disappear in order that Christianity might remain."⁵ The Christianity that would remain for Harnack was not fixed doctrine or dogma, but the gospel as "dynamic reality." Jesus awakens the consciousness of people in all ages. For Harnack, it should also be noted that this was a gospel of Jesus rather than a gospel concerning Him. The gospel of Jesus embraces three themes. One of them is eschatological and this is important to point out because Harnack's theology would have a profound effect on twentieth century liberal thinking. The three themes of the gospel for Harnack were: "Firstly, the kingdom of God and its coming. Secondly, God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul. Thirdly, the higher righteousness and commandment to love."⁶ For our purposes, this emphasis recast Christianity and a concept of the millennium into a "my kingdom is exclusively of this world" mode.

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⁵Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* translated by T.B. Saunders, introduction by Rudolf Bultmann (New York: Augsburg Fortress, 1957), 13-14.

⁶von Harnack, *Christianity?* 56.

An important historian, even if he was no friend to Christianity, was Franz Overbeck (1837-1905). A close friend of Nietzsche, Overbeck protested vehemently the idea that Christianity had now graduated into a wonderful and beneficial this-worldly religion. He maintained that Christianity is only to be understood correctly in its eschatological context. He went so far as to say that Christianity becomes a form of paganism when it blends Christ with culture. Thus for Overbeck, Harnack was the high priest of unchristian and modern theology.⁷

Nineteenth century thinking in most all of its forms had a tremendous influence on the twentieth century. The Irvingites, Darbyites, Campbellites, and revivalists of the nineteenth century, on the one hand, passed on their ideas to the Fundamentalist and Evangelical movements of the twentieth where apocalyptic and millennial themes became highly embellished. Schleiermacher, Hegel, Darwin, Harnack, Troeltsch (to name just a few), on the other hand, paved the way both academically and culturally for twentieth century figures such as Barth, Bultmann, Tillich, and Sartre. Contemporary theological themes included the death of God, existentialism, the social gospel, Marxist liberation theology, positivism, deconstructionism, and, eventually, postmodernism. All of these "isms" had important implications in the development of popular twentieth century forms of millennialism and apocalypticism in mainline Christianity.

Millennial communities blossomed and flourished in the twentieth century. The decade of the 1960s, with its utopic themes of counterculture and commune, resulted in revolt upon all mediating institutions, the church included. Mainline Christian churches were abandoned for cults, "non-denominational" denominations, and a renewed and vigorous individualism. Evangelical and Fundamentalist mega-churches and para-church (the charismatic movement) ministries sprang up, emphasizing the need for one's personal relationship with Jesus in spite of, and even apart from, the church. The new birth was widely understood not in the context of baptism, but in terms of individual decision. The assassinations of two Kennedys, the gunning down of four students at Kent State, the murders of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., the Vietnam War, and the Cold War, with its accompanying fear of nuclear holocaust, set the

⁷Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century, Volume II 1870-1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 225.

tone for the feverish millennial impulses of the 1970s. End times themes filled pulpits, coffeehouses, books, tapes, and movies. Many believed the rapture was around the corner. Sermons pointed to the computer called "the Beast" in Brussels, Belgium, which was believed to be capable of assigning every man, woman, and child on earth an identification in three sets of six numbers each, or literally 666. The Antichrist was figured to be anyone from Henry Kissinger to the Shah of Iran; the papacy was but his able-bodied assistant. Then there was the painting of Christ knocking, not at the door, as in the Burne-Jones work, but upon the United Nations building as if it were a door. Other artistic flare included depictions of cars falling off of bridges, an airplane suddenly without its raptured pilot, and bridges collapsing signaling the beginning of Armageddon. An impressive array of end times maps were readily available, inspired by the margin notes of the Scofield Reference Bible. Of course there were (and still are) the pontifications of Hal Lindsay in his best selling book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*.⁸

There was no small amount of millennial fervor in the 1980s. In 1982, the planetary alignment known as the "Jupiter Effect" spurred yet another series of books, articles, sermons, and wide-eyed certainty in the Fundamentalist, Evangelical, and Pentecostal communities that this was indeed the time of the end. The year 1988 featured the influential *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. In this instance, another Evangelical enthusiast and NASA engineer, Edgar Whisenant, claimed to have figured right where so many others had gone wrong.⁹

John Leland's excellent article in *Newsweek*, November 1, 1999, sums up very well the millennium madness of the 1990s. He writes of a modern day American Elijah who predicted that the year 2000 would usher in the end of the world. In the latter part of this century he led thousands of Americans to Jerusalem to await the return of Christ. The Reverend Bobby Bible, a Los Angeles-based Fundamentalist preacher, as late as December 31, 1999, stood on the Mount of Olives with his followers proclaiming that the end was coming on January 1. Leland noted that there were about 100 Christians living on the Mount of Olives, the very

⁸Hal Lindsay with C. C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

⁹Edgar C. Whisenant, *On Borrowed Time: The Bible Dates of the 10th Week of Daniel, Armageddon; The Millennium: 88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988* (Nashville: World Bible Society, 1988).

spot where they believe that the Bible says that Jesus will return to earth.¹⁰ In addition to Brother Elijah and the Reverend Bible, another American, called "Brother David," had been waiting in Jerusalem with five followers in an ecstatic prayer vigil because, as he reported to *Newsweek*, "I feel that the Lord is returning, and the millennium is to be the time of his coming."¹¹ Israeli authorities, well aware of Fundamentalist Christianity's preoccupation with the marriage between Zionism and apocalypticism, have already expelled a number of these groups from their country.

According to a *Newsweek* poll, eighteen percent of Americans expect the end of the world, or Armageddon, to come within their lifetime. Jerry Falwell has recently announced that the "Antichrist" is already among us. Earlier last year, Falwell distributed a packet known as "the Y2K Time Bomb," which included a video, *A Christian Guide to the Millennium Bug*. The package also included a "Family Readiness Checklist," admonishing people to stock up on such items as gardening utensils, cotton swabs, and peanut butter and jelly. "Y2K is God's instrument to shake this nation, to humble this nation," Falwell had said in a broadcast in 1998.¹² Some prognosticators in today's popular Evangelical circles have replaced Kissinger with Bill Gates as the Antichrist. According to this version of things, the President of Microsoft has already put a mark upon the forehead (your computer terminal), and a mark upon your right hand (the mouse). Hundreds of websites are now springing up describing various millennial scenarios. Many doomsdayers are no longer standing on street corners or on soapboxes warning passers by of the impending Apocalypse, but they have retreated into cyber-space and the world wide web.¹³ Movies such as "The Omega Code" and Schwarzenegger's "End of Days" are among Hollywood's versions of the Apocalypse, with many more no doubt to come.

On the other hand, J. Gordon Melton reports that he is surprisingly disappointed that there have not been even more apocalyptic enthusiasts than are currently on the scene. "I expected to have a field day with millennial groups," he says. "And there was nothing." Ted Daniel, who

¹⁰John Leland, "Millennial Madness," *Newsweek* (November 1, 1999).

¹¹Leland, "Millennial Madness."

¹²Hanna Rosin, "Maybe It's Not the Apocalypse," *The Washington Post* (December 28, 1999).

¹³Leland, "Millennial Madness."

runs the Millennial Center in Pennsylvania and keeps a close eye on doomsday cults explains, "It's the usual pattern. If you're a millenarian prophet, you have to keep people excited. But once the date gets closer, you back off." Indeed, a number of Fundamentalist and Evangelical writers backed off as January 1, 2000 approached. The Reverend Ralph Moats had relocated from California to Montana in 1992 to prepare for doomsday. He calls his sect the "End Times Harvest Church." However, in December 1999, Moats said that he believed that January 1 would be just another New Year's Eve.¹⁴

Other Evangelical writers besides Falwell and Moats who previously had prophesied and profited from people's millennial expectations include Toronto-based minister Grant R. Jeffery, author of *The Millennium Meltdown* and *Armageddon: Earth's Last Days*. Just prior to the New Year, Jeffrey adjusted his predictions, expecting them to unfold "only distantly." But apparently not too distantly. "It's not a January problem," Jeffrey declares. "It will manifest itself throughout the year, like maybe in March or April or May, or even later." Damian Thompson, author of *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium*, maintains that "people who last year became excited about the millennium bug are suddenly saying, 'I never said that. It was him, not me.'"¹⁵ One year ago, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, who have sold more than 10 million copies of the *Left Behind* series, prophesied global upheaval on January 1, 2000. "The Y2K bug could trigger financial meltdown," their website warned, "making it possible for the Antichrist or his emissaries to . . . dominate the world commercially until it is destroyed." Now Jenkins and LaHaye are backing down and claiming that "We don't think it relates to Y2K at all. We are bemused by people who do."¹⁶

Nevertheless, for many Evangelicals, the Apocalypse is indeed around the corner. It is still coming. But more and more retreated in the final weeks before the advent of the year 2000. Some dispensationalists have calculated that the year 2007 will trigger the end because that will mark the end of the seven-year Tribulation. Others look ahead to 2033, counting from Christ's death rather than His birth.

¹⁴Leland, "Millennial Madness."

¹⁵Rosin, "Maybe It's Not the Apocalypse."

¹⁶Rosin, "Maybe It's Not the Apocalypse."

The Effects of Gnosticism in Christianity and Millennial Thought

Evangelicals, Protestant liberals, and others have certainly steered away from Fundamentalist extremism and biblical literalism. But they have not remained untainted. Some form of apocalypticism, utopia, millennial impulses, or visions for the future seem to have had their effects on much of Christendom. This is evident in an early book by Carl F. H. Henry, perhaps the leading systematician of Neo-evangelicalism. In his book, *Evangelicals in Search of an Identity*, Henry, along with numerous other Evangelicals, laments that the doctrine of the church is the missing link in Evangelical circles.¹⁷ While Evangelicals understand the essential message of redemption and almost sound Lutheran when expounding on justification, by (unconsciously “feliculously”) rejecting or at least failing to understand the Chalcedonian Christology of the church, they (more consciously) dismiss the real presence of Christ in the sacraments outright. In this regard, the distinctions “liberal” or “conservative” bear little meaning. This removal of catholic Christology from the Reformed Protestant world has had profound effects for the entire history of Protestantism—both conservative and liberal. One example to demonstrate that Protestants of all stripes basically arrive at the same conclusion is from one of the great liberal Protestant theologians of this century, Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971). Niebuhr writes excerpts in a diary he kept while he served as a pastor of a small Protestant congregation in Detroit in the early part of the twentieth century:

... visited old Mrs. G. today and gave her communion. This was my first experience with communion at the sick bed. I think there is a good deal of superstition connected with the rite. . . . Yet I will not be too critical. If the rite suggests and expresses the emotion of honest contrition it is more than superstition. But that is the difficulty of acting as priest. . . . Whether it is a blessing or a bit of superstition rests altogether with the recipient.

I must admit that I am losing some of my aversion to the sacraments cultivated in my seminary days. There is something very beautiful about parents bringing their child to the altar with a prayer of thanksgiving and as an act of dedication. . . . Incidentally Mrs. G gave me a shock this afternoon. After the service was completed she

¹⁷Carl F. H. Henry, *Evangelicals in Search of an Identity* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1976).

fished around under her pillow and brought forth a five dollar bill. That was to pay me for my trouble. I never knew this fee business still existed in such a form in Protestantism.¹⁸

The concept of the kingdom of God as Christ's church manifesting Christ's presence in earthen vessels of water, bread, and wine is firmly rejected in the greater world of Protestantism. And therefore, the forgiveness of sins bestowed by the church through word and sacrament is not understood nor believed to be the goal of the kingdom of God in this world. Moral improvement (postmillennialism and Protestant liberalism), or rapture and escape (dispensational premillennialism and Fundamentalism), a this-worldly political kingdom (Marxism, capitalism, etc.), all become the much-sought-after utopias lying outside of the church. The heart of the matter today is the same as it was when Luther battled with Zwingli in 1529. Zwingli's theology is rooted in Gnosticism. Luther's refusal to give him the "right hand of fellowship" following the debate was because of Zwingli's essentially Gnostic thinking, which affected all his doctrine, especially his Christology. Luther's conclusion had far-reaching implications for today. Christology and Second Article theology in general is missing from the concept of spirituality in the twentieth century. In the interest of ecumenical relations, Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner introduced the concept of "anonymous Christians" to describe those who have not heard the gospel and embrace it unconsciously within their own religion, be it Buddhism, Islam, or others. John Hick has emphasized that First Article theology, rather than Second, should be the bridge over the troubling implications of the classic Christian claim of the exclusivity of Christ as the sole means of salvation. The title of Hick's book is telling: *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religion* (1988).¹⁹

The word "spirituality" has come into widespread usage in the last thirty years. It has found a home in nearly every form of religious expression. The New Age movement, Wicca, neo-paganism, multiculturalism, Hinduism, and nearly every "ism" under the sun can "connect with" or "center" on "spirituality." But a thoroughgoing Gnostic

¹⁸Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, forward by Martin E. Marty (1929; reprint, San Francisco: Harper Row Publishers, 1986), 6-7.

¹⁹John Hick and Paul F. Knittner, editors, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religion* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987).

divorce has taken place between Christology and spirituality, even unwaringly, and not so "feliculously," amongst today's version(s) of Reformed theology: Evangelicalism, Catholic mysticism, and the like. One should not be surprised therefore to hear the "modern *spiritual life*" described in the following way:

God is not a supernatural being off in the distance somewhere. God, or the sacred, or the spirit is the encompassing spirit all around us and within us.

The central claim is that the Christian life is about the opening of the self at the deepest level to the sacred. Spirituality is about becoming conscious of and intentional about a relationship with the sacred, acting compassionate toward others. Conscious and intentional because we are already in relationship with God.²⁰

The Millennial fever to which both sects and denominations have today succumbed is rooted in a disease of a more primal nature. Millennialism has its roots theologically, philosophically, and historically in Gnosticism. Thomas Molnar writes: "The utopian tendency in man's mind is very strong and appears in almost every age."²¹ The opening words of Scripture, "In the beginning God created . . ." tell of the faithful marriage of God to His beloved creation with man as His crowning jewel. But when the serpent uttered the fatal question "Yea, hath God said?" and when the forbidden fruit was eaten, unholy knowledge (*gnosis*), sin, and the loss of Eden resulted. How to regain that which was lost has been man's quest ever since. From the time of the Tower of Babel to the babblings and musings of philosophers, sages, poets, and worldly wise men throughout history to the present day, there have been long and well chronicled accounts of man's feeble attempts to bridge the gap between himself and God through knowledge.

Ted McAllister, in his outstanding book *Revolt Against Modernity: Leo Strauss, Eric Vogelin, and the Search for a Post-Liberal Order*, points out that Gnosticism is a belief in the power of knowledge to transform reality and thereby create an earthly perfection.²² Is it not millennialism in its various

²⁰From a lecture titled "Revisioning Theology at the Millenium," given by Marcus Borg, professor of Religious Studies, Oregon State University.

²¹Thomas Molnar, *Utopia: The Perennial Heresy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 3.

²²Ted V. McAllister, *Revolt Against Modernity: Leo Strauss, Eric Vogelin, and the Search*

forms that contends that God is preparing a better world tomorrow or a this-worldly paradise regained? Somehow or other the present world in which we live is filled with pain, imperfection and evil, and life is, as Thomas Hobbes noted, "cruel, miserable, brutish, and short."

For unbelieving Gnostics, the "problem of evil" is not resolved in the sacred knowledge and proclamation of God's word, the historical event of Christ crucified, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Christian church. Kant convinced many that this sacred knowledge was "noumena" and epistemologically inaccessible. He resolved the problem by looking to human knowledge and the autonomy of human reason. Reason will ultimately bridge the gap between what "is" and what "ought to be." For Kant, religion is to be discovered "within the limits of reason alone." Kant would conclude that the essence of religion is "the moral law within." Man is obligated to obey this "categorical imperative." This is merely another form of utopianism.

Utopians also long ultimately for a "better place" in social structures and mediating institutions of society – chiefly government. Politics and social engineering are the appointed means of carrying out their various visions. The "better place" theme appears throughout the history of philosophy as evidenced by the Idealism of Plato, Berkeley, and Hegel.

Karl Marx, Hegelian to the core, presents the politicalization of utopia. His radical program to interpret history as the dialectic of class warfare and political struggle had as its unfolding a this-worldly utopia. The quest for utopia divorced from God's revelation of His kingdom and church on earth leads to the manufactured earthly or heavenly kingdoms derived from human reason. Molnar clearly understood this:

We may speak of heresy in its strict sense only in the case of utopians who admit to religious beliefs; but in reality, all utopians follow the same pattern: the liberation of man from *heteronomy*, from the guidance and providence of a personal God, in the name of *autonomy*, of moral self-government. But since this would lead immediately to anarchy, the emancipated individual is necessarily

for a *Post-Liberal Order* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1996). The volume is a revision of McAllister's Ph.D. dissertation in history at Vanderbilt University.

plunged by the utopian into the collectivity which will assume his guidance and provide for him.²³

America, with its rigorous commitment to battling the evil ways of communism and spreading its own version of utopia on earth—democracy and capitalism—is also filled with a “this-worldly” and political vision of utopia. One need only think of the themes of some of the administrations in just this century alone. Roosevelt’s “New Deal,” Kennedy’s “New Frontier,” Johnson’s “Great Society,” Bush’s “New World Order,” and Clinton’s “Bridge to the Future” all bespeak the constant refrain of the better place motif so strongly resonating in human consciousness. Harold Bloom contends in *The American Religion* that the real religion of America is not Christianity. He argues, quite convincingly, that it is Gnosticism.

As Americans, we are obsessed also with information, and we regard religion as the most vital aspect of information. I reflect that Gnosticism was (and is) a kind of information theory. . . . Information becomes the emblem of salvation; the false Creation-Fall concerned matter and Energy, but the Pleroma or Fullness, the original Abyss, is all information. *What they [Americans] actually seek to restore is not the church of the first Christians, but the primal Abyss, named by the ancient Gnostics as both our foremother and our forefather.* Our national millenarianism, so pervasive in the nineteenth century, and still tempestuous among Fundamentalists and Pentecostals, associates itself with the books of Daniel and Revelation and leads to our crusading wars and unwholesome fantasies. . . . Only a Gnostic reading of the Bible can make us into the land of Promise. The new irony of American history is that we fight now to make the world safe for Gnosticism, our sense of religion.

Yet Gnosticism, if we are to consider it a religion, or at least a spiritual stance, is anything but nihilistic or hopeless, which may be why it is now, and always has been, the hidden Religion of the United States, the American Religion proper.²⁴

²³Molnar, *Utopia*, 23.

²⁴Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 30; 50 (emphasis added).

Perhaps there is no better illustration of the force of Gnosticism than the twentieth century and largely American preoccupation with the fast-paced progress of science, scientism, physics, and technology. Science is indeed Gnosticism's sacred text. For many it provides the only source of authentic knowledge. Only that which can be subsumed under the rubric of the "scientific method" is knowable. For scientism and positivism, reality is reduced to "phenomena," matter in motion, observable, measurable, and so on. Quantum physics has additionally attempted to demonstrate that all matter is in constant flux. All things outside of science, like morality, ethics, and religious "truths," are therefore also outside the bounds of epistemological certainty, unknowable, and hence purely subjective. Science, therefore, is to be hailed as the new and true way to salvation. Gnosticism has nearly come of age as its essence is the belief in the power of knowledge to transform reality. Technology provides the means for knowledge to increase and along with it, the power to discover more information and more knowledge. Christianity has no place in this new metaphysics. According to Eric Voegelin, Christianity has been displaced in two phases. It has been "despiritualized and respiritualized." For once positivism "destroyed" Judeo-Christian consciousness, individuals were now open to "respiritualization" from non-Christian sources.²⁵ The new "spirituality" includes such ideologies as humanism, scientism, New Age spirituality, multiculturalism, neo-paganism, biologism, psychologism, spin politics and the like. We have seen the steady disintegration of the worldly utopia of Marxism in recent decades. We have also witnessed an epistemological disintegration of Gnosticism in the latter half of the twentieth century. Saint Paul wrote long ago for Timothy as a young pastor to "instruct those that oppose themselves" (2 Timothy 2:25). Notice that Paul says to instruct those that oppose not Timothy or Christianity, but themselves. All varieties and versions of unbelief gradually reveal their false foundations and utter hollowness. Gnosticism's creed has always been the contention that knowledge is the key to the utopia that man so earnestly desires. But knowledge that is not founded upon the truth of God's word is a knowledge that will eventually culminate in both logical contradiction and solipsistic collapse. Scripture declares that the "fear of

²⁵Michael B. Federici, "Logophobia: Eric Voegelin on Scientism and the Postmodern Corruption in Politics," *The Intercollegiate Review* 35 (Fall 1999): 14-21.

the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 7:1). And it is the only basis upon which one may build a knowledge that "will not pass away."

Postmodernism is Gnosticism's creed turned on itself. Gnosticism's quest has been a search for meaning and utopia through knowledge. Its long journey has brought it to the nihilistic conclusion that there is no meaning. Richard Tarnas summarizes for us the essence of the postmodern mind:

What is called postmodern varies considerably according to context, but in its most general and widespread form, the postmodern mind may be viewed as an open-ended, indeterminate set of attitudes that has been shaped by a great diversity of intellectual cultural currents; these range from pragmatism, existentialism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, to feminism, hermeneutics, deconstruction. . . . Out of this maelstrom . . . a few widely shared working principles have emerged. There is an appreciation of the plasticity and constant change of reality and knowledge, a stress on the priority of concrete experience over fixed abstract principles, and a conviction that no single a priori thought system should govern belief or investigation. The critical search for truth is constrained to be tolerant of ambiguity and pluralism, and its outcome will necessarily be knowledge that is relative and fallible rather than absolute or certain. Hence the quest for knowledge must be endlessly self-revising.²⁶

For postmodernism, truth is not to be discovered or encountered nor is it something revealed. Rather it is merely a mode of discourse or a narrative shaped by a context. Hermeneutical principles contextualize meaning and language certainly does not render or refer to anything as "meaningful" or "true." Language is but a mode of power. To put it in the words of Richard Rorty, postmodernism is whatever one's colleagues allow one to get away with.

Herein lies the ultimate contradiction. If nothing is true or meaningful, then how can anything that the postmodernist says about meaninglessness be true? The search for meaning, millennium, and utopia, finally arrives at the ultimate conclusion that there is no meaning

²⁶Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 395-396.

to be discovered anywhere. Solomon anticipated this centuries ago: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 12:8).

Denouement: The Church as God's Kingdom on Earth and Future Glory!

There is no better way to combat Gnosticism, especially as it has run its weary course, than to declare that God has already established His kingdom (utopia if you will) on earth. It lies not in millennial dream worlds or the various political infrastructures of the kingdom on the left. It is His kingdom and it is indeed His glorious bride, the church! The Apostles' Creed embodies this central truth. The First Article speaks of God's Creation of the world, and, contra Gnosticism, Scripture declares "And God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1). Article II proclaims the gospel in the person and work of Jesus Christ who became flesh to redeem the world. Francis Pieper reminds us that:

. . . the *Gloria in excelsis* of the angels sounds forth its glad message, "Peace on earth," not in some future millennial kingdom, but at the birth of Christ and the preaching of the Gospel at that event, and that Christ says not of the citizens of a future millennial kingdom, but of all who believe the Gospel: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you" (John 14:27).²⁷

The Third Article of the Creed declares the Holy Spirit and the one holy catholic and apostolic church to be where the very communion of saints takes place. It is the one central activity of the church to bestow the forgiveness of sins to this very communion of saints and not to an invisible, disincarnate "church" in some spiritual or invisible existence known only through Gnostic insights and visions of some future longing. From Invocation to Benediction, the liturgy proclaims the work of Christ's church on earth: to communicate the gospel through God's divinely appointed Means of Grace—word and sacrament. From the Confession to the Creed and the prayers, the Lord's Supper and the singing of the *Agnus Dei*, the church proclaims to the world that God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, bestows the forgiveness of sins. Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and there is the "peace which passeth all understanding," including the fallen understanding of the

²⁷Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 volumes, (Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 3: 521.

Gnostics who are forever looking for their utopia not in forgiveness, but in knowledge. Here is where a thoroughly sacramental theology must come to bear. To dismiss the sacraments as mere symbols places the power to combat unbelief in words that have no physical reference point, but only a "spiritual" (whatever that means) one. Words then become the tool of Gnosticism and thus lead to a "verbal advantage" for those who would exchange their physical reference for a disembodied spiritual one. A non-sacramental theology leads to a spirituality that has no relationship to the Holy Trinity, creation, and the communion of saints and sinners gathered around it through word and sacrament. Hence we are back to spiritualizing and right back to the "finite not comprehending the infinite" of Calvinism. For example, the divorce of creation and reality from spirituality and knowledge. Christianity has always and must always oppose this separation.

The church is the very embodiment of Christ's kingdom and Christ's person and work on earth.²⁸ Earth, however, is not the church's final destiny. A this-worldly reign of Christ, which is the essential hope of the Millennialists, "misdirects and thus destroys the true Christian hope, which looks for that wonderful glory of heaven (Philippians 3:20-21; 1 Corinthians 1:6-8) into which the church militant shall be gathered at Christ's second coming (Matthew 25:34; 5:3, 10-12)."²⁹ Until that time, we undergo the trials and tribulations that Scripture declares that we will suffer. Whatever the apocalypse that we must face in this life, Luther's *Ein feste burg* proclaims triumphantly that even though "The old evil foe now means deadly woe," and even though "with might of ours can nought be done," and even though "devils all the world should fill," we confess that "one little Word can fell him," and that "for us fights the Valiant One whom God Himself elected." And therefore, "the kingdom ours remaineth."

²⁸David Scaer, *Christology*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, edited by Robert Preus, Volume 7 (Fort Wayne: The International Foundation for Confessional Lutheran Research, 1989), 108.

²⁹John Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1933), 622-623.