

## The American Genius

When Orthodoxy arrived here, what it tried to do, in a sort of naïve optimism or friendliness, was to look for commonalities and similarities with the native American religion, its peculiar Protestantism. In doing so, Orthodox missionary-immigrants discovered certain beliefs that appeared to be articles of the Nicene Creed, and certain cultural manifestations (e.g., crosses in the churches) that appeared to sound familiar from Holy Tradition

But in the fervent search for commonalities, the Orthodox mission has overlooked the significance of difference ... it is the separation from Holy Tradition that provides for us the most significant information about what is peculiar to America, her genius, and where we ought to travel to arrive at her center ... in other words, where we, in completing the work of Cyril and Methodios, need to go to reach the heart of the indigenous people, the "national consciousness" America

When we think about Sts Cyril and Methodios established pattern of mission. They set the groundwork for probably the greatest conversion of all time.

Their program is well known: the translation of Church language into the vernacular, the leading of the native people to theosis and development of indigenous leadership.

But we should notice that this glorious example of the Apostles to the Slavs is itself an application – or unfolding – of Our Lord’s instruction to the Seventy Apostles in Luke 10:

*When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house."*

The goal of the Orthodox Gospel Mission, wherever we go, is to proclaim, “Peace to the House” ... to go to where the people live, and to bring the Peace that passes understanding – the gracious atmosphere of the Holy Trinity – to the people in their language and in their land ... the establishment of Orthodoxy in the heart of the city, at the very hearthstone of the country.

Now I know this sounds like familiar stuff of evangelism: but we need to go beyond an immediate discussion of techniques, like the setting up of billboards, advertising and distribution of tracts, the putting up of tract racks, the scheduling of Celebrity events and even Christian rock concerts.

Without demeaning (for now) any of these techniques, I simply ask that we hold off from programming and planning, and spend some moments instead in thinking of mission, the Gospel, and what it means to bring Orthodoxy to America.

We need to think more deeply about what we mean by the ambiguous term, “evangelism” ... the aim of this conference today -- "the presentation of the Orthodox Gospel to the American genius" -- is about the most cogent, helpful “framing” of evangelism I’ve encountered

The presentation of the Orthodox Gospel to the American genius is a phrase that penetrates deeply into a question with two distinct parts: first, the object of our mission, the people and place, the house that needs peace ... and second, the nature of that “Peace” itself, the Gospel, the Orthodoxy that transcends all its national, ethnic appearances.

Specifically, we will take a look at the character of the American culture – its ethos – and how we can proclaim the Orthodox Gospel to that culture and in that language ... the American language is more than words ... it is a way of thinking, an album of memories, and book of stories, and a “yellow brick road” of historic desires.

The best indicator of the American genius is her actual and popular religion. To do this, we will take an interesting turn toward a rather obscure academic discipline – and that is the school of “religious criticism.”

The best religious critic is a controversial literary critic by the name of Harold Bloom. He is not Christian by a long shot. He identifies himself as a “non-practicing Jewish gnostic.”

Oddly enough, his Gnosticism actually serves us well here, as it is more sensitive to the enormous gnostic currents in American religion. These currents are consistently missed by most religious historians, especially on the Protestant side of religious history.

This religious criticism of American religion that Bloom offers reveals that it is, especially in contrast to its European antecedents, profoundly *gnostic*.

This explains a conundrum that has bedeviled American religious historians. We have always wondered why European Protestantism and even Catholicism have changed once it reached these shores.

One common reason is the dominance of post-enlightenment culture. You hear this theory in Franky Schaefer’s description of the New England worship service as something based upon the town hall meeting.

Another common theory blames the legacy of Puritanism, with all its anti-Church and pro-congregational sentiment.

Consequently, we in Orthodoxy have sought to answer these legacies with history and doctrinal lessons: all of which show that Orthodoxy is a unbroken witness to apostolic succession, worship and dogma.

Time will tell whether that rational appeal will succeed: but it does risk the possibility of becoming just another of America's seemingly-endless panoply of denominations who all say this very same thing.

I have often wondered whether this was the right approach for us in America. Don't get me wrong: these things about historic and doctrinal continuity need to be said, simply because it is true ... but will it *work*? Is this argument, for our time and place in America, rhetorically effective?

I don't think so ... one reason for this is because Americans do not care much about doctrine ... they care little about the truth about God, and certainly less about Natural Law (or God's expectations/wisdom found in Creation and articulated through scripture/tradition), and least about Christianity and the Church.

The common dismissal here is well-known: "doctrine" and "dogma" have now become cuss words in American linguistics ... they are accused of producing "intolerance" and an evil condition called "closed-mindedness," which is the only pathology in secular psychiatry that is allowed to have a moral etiology.

The other reason is that American's don't really care much about history ... this present culture, no matter what we call it, is "present-oriented," even "present-imprisoned" ... we have been told this before by the likes of Marshall McLuhan. This, by the way, is the real reason why graveyards are being given the miss, and cremations have become such an enthusiastic industry: it erases the past. Graveyards are spooky with memory. Urns just don't have that ambiance, that hard reality of tragedy, the unavoidable signification of the psychic need for salvation.

As such, America's entire culture has turned toward a therapeutic yearning for comfortable-ness, as we've already heard from Philip Rieff. The problem with this therapeutic culture, he notes, is that it hides a central deception: "the therapeutic age, for all its bluster about human potential and personal fulfillment, is inherently un-therapeutic and even, in some respects, antihuman" (*Triumph*, xi).

The main reason why America is resistant to doctrine and history – and is particularly resistant to Orthodoxy – is because her "genius," or her "national consciousness," is profoundly gnostic. This "real religion" is sometimes at odds with the stated or claimed religion, and so it is understood by an examination of behavior and values – especially in light of the fact that our culture is no longer "philosophical," but "therapeutic." This examination has been done admirably well by Harold Bloom, in his rather neglected book, *The American Religion*.

American Gnosticism is summed up nicely by Bloom in this passage:

*What I call the American Religion ... seems to me to have three fundamental principles. The first is that what is best and oldest in us goes back well before Creation, and so is no part of the Creation. The second is that what makes us free is knowledge, a history of*

*facts and events, rather than a belief founded upon mere assent. The third is that this freedom has a solitary element in it, an element imbued by the loneliness of belated American time, and the American experience of the abyss of space. What holds these principles together is the American persuasion, however muted or obscured, that we are mortal gods, destined to find ourselves again in worlds as yet undiscovered. (Bloom, *The American Religion*, p99)*

In the first point, which is the most startling, there is the ancient Gnostic belief that the soul is uncreated and is as old as God. This can easily be seen in Mormonism. But for the Evangelicals, the picture is more complicated. As a group, they hold to most of the articles of the Nicene Creed – in fact, all of them if you permit their redefinition of terms like “baptism,” “Apostolic,” and “Church.”

But there is that nagging persistence in Evangelicalism for personalized religion. The Megachurch movement has been successful because it treats the church-goer like a customer, who gets to choose from a smorgasbord lineup of various experiences a whole cafeteria tray that will satisfy his individual tastes and needs. It turns out that the biggest need, and the most successful commodity, of the Evangelical mega-church is anonymity, unaccountability, and evasion of responsibility.

Think of it: you could go to 20,000-attende church, and no one will know that you’re on the outs with your wife and that last week you got picked up for DUI. Think of it: you could go to church and believe that Jesus and Buddha and Mohammad were three great guys with good ideas, and you might as well vote for all three just to cover the bases: you’re not accountable for your beliefs and no one will know.

Think of it: you could attend as often as you want – or more likely, as seldom as you want – and the church budget won’t take a hit as it would in all the Orthodox parishes I know. There are too many in a megachurch for you to feel responsible for your time, your money and your faithfulness.

There is also, in Evangelicalism, a thirst for experience that eclipses any importance of doctrine or truth. What matters, the Evangelical will tell you, is *heart knowledge* as opposed to head knowledge. What matters is a conversion experience, even an ecstatic experience that is well known to Gnostics and neo-platonists of all ages – the individual, solitary psychic ascension from the created world into an individualized confrontation with the Infinite.

“Take Jesus as your personal Saviour” is the common denominator that links all Evangelicals and Charismatics, many Catholics and even Mormons together. I think Harold Bloom is right in discerning in this radical individualization of religion a significant vestige of the Gnostic religion. Despite their doctrinal affirmations to the contrary, the Evangelical emphasis upon experience and ecstasy is rooted in the old Gnostic conviction that man’s soul is divine by nature, and not by grace as Orthodox Tradition teaches.

Bloom takes seriously the phenomenon of American religion as it really is, rather than as a continuation of the European state church, or European reformation movements. In doing so, he notes correctly two things:

First, that Evangelicalism is (or was) the majority American religion: he seems to echo the finding of Richard Quebedeaux, who wrote back in 1978 that American Evangelicalism is comprised of not only the expected Protestant revivalistic historic communities, but also major portions of Catholicism, the charismatic movement, and even Mormonism. Even by themselves, without these additions from other groups, Evangelicals count for over 26% of the population: this is significantly higher than the Mainline Protestant denominations, who account for only 18%, and even that number is rapidly decreasing.

Second, since he is not hampered by the need to demonstrate continuity with European Christendom, he is able to detect the strong commonalities that Evangelicalism shares with other members of the American religious revival tent: perhaps it is true, as Salt Lake City would like us to believe, that the Evangelicals do share a lot in common with the Mormons ... to be sure, there are many doctrinal differences: but in the religious experience, Bloom says, there is much that is similar ... he finds similarities, along the lines of his three Gnostic principles, between Evangelicalism and other American religious phenomena, like Seventh Day Adventism, even Christian Science and California Big Sur New Age-ism.

And while the former Evangelical clergyman in me cries out for justice and vindication at this moment, listing down all the doctrinal distinctions that separate my former evangelical brethren from the Adventists, the Mormons, the Witnesses, the followers of Mary Baker Eddy and the purveyors of crystals, space music and human potential, I must admit that doctrine and dogma are not so significant anymore ... even now, the Seventh Day Adventists are welcomed as one of their own by Evangelicals (they were actually one of the expert presenters in the last Church Growth Conference I attended at Fuller Seminary) ... even now, many in the Evangelical world are starting to experiment with the notion that Mormons can be received into their category.

But we may be at a watershed moment in American religious history. It appears that Evangelicalism has reached its high water mark, and now the tide is beginning to ebb. For years, the fastest growing religious group was the Evangelicals: that is simply no longer the case. It is, as we have said earlier, the Unaffiliated group.

There are several reasons why the Evangelicals have lost this leading position, and may be heading into a decline. One is certainly the effect of the constant change of affiliation and fragmentation that exists among the Evangelicals. Another reason may turn out to be the rigid political affiliation encouraged by Evangelical leaders.

But there are deeper reasons. Enthusiasm, not doctrine, is the keynote of the American religion, whether it is manifested in Evangelical or other forms. Monsignor Ronald Knox

wrote an important, and I think brilliant, historical study on this subject: *Enthusiasm, a Chapter in the History of Religion* (1950). In it, he writes:

*Enthusiasm does not maintain itself at fever heat: dance as you will, flap your hands as you will, you cannot conjure up the old days when people rolled on the floor in agonies of convincement, and talked in strange sounds.* (p. 565)

Enthusiasm cannot be pursued as a goal. And even when it comes, it exhausts the subject and insinuates a cynicism toward religion. There are entire regions in the US which are called “burnt over districts.” I think that Evangelicalism as a whole is entering the “burnt over phase.” It has been mightily disappointed by political misfortune in the last year. It has suffered the scandalous offense of some of its top leaders. It has also suffered the aggregate result of failure to catechize, failure to indoctrinate, failure to draw the link between theology and ethics. It has permitted the free migration of people from one denomination to another, and in so doing, it has diminished the faith commitments of every denomination.

That is why the Evangelicals are entering a time of decrease. Their particular form of truncated Christian religion may have been possible in an America where Natural Law was upheld in civil society – in other words, when the culture was “philosophical” as opposed to “psychological.” In that temporary environment, the American religion was complemented by culture: the evangelical hope was that society could do the “wisdom” part of philosophy, while religion could do the “gospel” (as truncated as it was). But now that we have entered a therapeutic culture in which *there is no wisdom tradition*. The culture’s gravitation pulls religion toward a gnostic experientialism, evangelicalism cannot survive as a dominant religion. It will not. It is not.

There are just as many reasons why the Unaffiliated group is gaining. We should look at this category like a separate religion, and see what it has to offer.

The Unaffiliated group offers complete individualistic freedom. You can pursue any passion or desire as long as “you don’t hurt anyone else.” If you do get hurt or get down in the dumps, you can join a twelve-step group if you’re middle class, or get plastic surgery if you’re in a higher tax bracket. You can modify God according to your tastes, and take your cafeteria tray to the smorgasbord of all religions: a little Sufi-ism here, a little Zen Buddhism there, a little Kabbala and a few Christian mystics, Jakob Boehme and even the Hesychasts.

You don’t have to stick around in any single framework, because you are Unaffiliated, and you don’t have to put up with anything difficult or unpopular.

This “not having to stick around” and avoidance of difficult responsibility has turned out to be an important commodity in the American religious market ... and it describes so well the American genius at this moment.

Recently, a new book came out from Barna pollster David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons: *unChristian: What a new generation really thinks about Christianity... and why it matters*. In this important new study of Americans between the ages of 16 and 29, the authors write this (as cited in [Terry Mattingly](#)):

*Most [of this age group, which they call “Mosaics and Busters”] ... have an enormous amount of firsthand experience with Christians and the Christian faith. The vast majority of “outsiders” (“unaffiliated”) within the Mosaic and Buster generations have been to church before; most have attended at least one church for several months; and nearly nine out of every 10 say they know Christians personally, having about five friends who are believers.”Here’s the bottom line, according to their research: “Christians are primarily perceived for what they stand against. We have become famous for what we oppose, rather than what we are for.”*

“Christians are primarily perceived for what they stand against.” That indictment says two things. On one hand, it speaks of some of the negative consequences of the Evangelical participation in politics. But on the other, and more important, hand, it speaks of this particular group’s aversion to leadership in the spiritual realm: leadership and hierarchy, even a Personal God, are all obstacles to the immediate apprehension of the Infinite – which should sound familiar, as this is the old Gnostic dream.

“Spirituality” in the new American genius, which calls our young like the sirens called Odysseus, is mystical ecstasy without morality. It is experience without dogma. It is prayer that is uttered in an echo chamber. It is a religion that has stripped meaning away from the physical world: there is no Creation, because there is no Creator (since evolution is used mainly by American gnostics to eradicate the dogma of Incarnation and the wisdom tradition of Natural Law). It is a religion that has fully embraced the therapeutic culture, and has made a full entrance into gnosis.

This is the reason why the new generation of unaffiliates are so patently anti-authoritative. They do not hate adults. It’s simply that they live in a different world, and are impatient with us primitives who will not evolve from the old.

At Christ the Saviour Seminary in Johnstown, I teach an experimental course on “American Society and Religion,” in which we are trying to study the contours of American culture in a hyper-technological, post-modern age. We are looking at various religious groups, Christian and non-Christian. And we are paying close attention to the markings of the “Unaffiliated Category.”

One of my students told us that he and his brother grew up as Catholic Altar Boys, part of a devout family who didn’t miss the weekly Mass.

Over the years, things have changed. Marc is now a candidate for the Holy Orthodox Priesthood. His brother, however, is far from the faith, and is living quite contently in the Unaffiliated group. Marc interviewed his brother about why he left the faith. Here is part of his poignant interview:

*What would make you reconsider going to church again? A miracle. If a higher power confronted me in a real time at a real place and told me that in order to save my life and the rest of the world, I needed to attend church, then I would go. Far fetched? Well that's my feelings about going to church. It is not a place I feel I need to go in order to have a conversation with god. And the club of people that are in church does not want me there any more than I want to be there in the first place. I make my silent peace with God on my own time every day. That to me is true religion and faith - looking inwardly and knowing that you are alive because of God, you are there to serve him - but you have the right to appreciate that and be thankful for that in your own way. To each his own. Do you believe in God? Most Definitely. Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? No. I think Jesus is a human and God is not a human. Therefore Jesus is the son of Mary and Joseph, not God. J.C. however, took on the role as servant and messenger of God. Did God bestow this on J.C? I doubt it; I think J.C. just took it upon himself. Are you "spiritual but non-religious"? If so, what do you mean? Yes - I really think I answered that already. Why do you think more Americans are opting to stop practicing their faith? I think most Americans are opting to stop practicing their faith because they no longer feel that the religion that they were raised as is leading them along the most fair and healthy life. I think a lot of people view religions that govern behavior as being archaic and sometimes lacking common decency and sense. And I also think that Americans view Christianity as hypocritical at times.*

At the end of a recent address to presidents of Christian colleges, the Barna pollster, David Kinnaman, was trying to make sense of the foreboding signs of the near future. This is what he said:

*We have been the party in power for several hundred years," said Kinnaman. "That gives us a different kind of challenge, a different set of opportunities. ... We have been so busy trying to be a Christian nation that I think we may have forgotten what it means to follow Christ.*

Without sounding complacent or triumphalist, the Orthodox Church is here in America to teach the Unaffiliated, the disaffected, the burnt-out revivalists, the evangelicals who worry about encroaching Gnosticism, that very thing: just what it means to follow Christ.