Late Modern Esoteric Christianities

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Introduction

"Esoteric Christianity" is a term that has been used to describe a range of practices, philosophies, movements, and organizations that espouse a *sui generis* "inner" tradition within or alongside the stream of historic Christianity. The term has arisen in different religious contexts in the 20th and 21st centuries, from Theosophy[1] and continental esoteric traditions[2] to more recent attempts to locate the origins of esoteric Christianity in Eastern Orthodoxy.[3] Richard Smoley has recently attempted to collate these disparate streams of Christian esotericism in his influential *Inner Christianity,* which continues to be cited widely by proponents of alternative Christianities. While these writers are interested in making authoritative claims about the existence of an alternative or submerged stream of Christianity (at varying degrees of divergence from the historic or "exoteric" Christian churches), that emphasizes higher teachings and inner experience of the Divine over and against creedal orthodoxy and assent to doctrine, I am interested primarily in the widespread appropriation of the rhetoric of esotericism by late 20th and early 21st century American Christians. Specifically, I am interested in the search for the esoteric as a phenomenon

[1] Annie Besant, *Esoteric Christianity, or the Lesser Mysteries* (Chennai, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1914).

[2] Valentin Tomberg, *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1980).

[3] Robin Amis, *A Different Christianity: Early Christian Esotericism and Modern Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

of modernity that reflects concerns about secularization and religious pluralism, drawing on identified themes of 20th century American religion such as primitivism, individualism, and the therapeutic nature of religion. Finally, I am interested in the ways that this term is embodied and naturalized by religious practitioners, both individually and in community.

In the following paper, I will analyze the trends of late modern esoteric Christianity, attempting to characterize some of the emergent practices and groupings that fall under this umbrella, what I have roughly termed the "liturgical-contemplative," "New Age revelation," and "ecclesial neo-Gnostic" groupings. It is important to note that these labels are neither exhaustive nor used by practitioners but are artificial constructions which, I hope, will serve to illuminate esoteric Christian identities and understandings of their relationship to other Christian bodies. As will be discussed, these groups are dynamically related to each other and to mainline Christian institutions. I will conclude with an attempt to situate this broad umbrella of Christian practice and identity within current sociological models of new religious formations.

Esoteric Christianity as "Inner Tradition"

Esoteric Christianity, as its current practitioners understand it, can be seen as both an expression and appropriation of the historic themes of Western esoteric spirituality: those systems of knowledge that have been rejected in the Western modernizing project that include but are not limited to alchemy, magic, astrology, and broadly "gnostic" approaches to religion over and against doctrinal and salvation-oriented approaches.[4] Wouter Hanegraaff notes the problematic characterization of the practices as "Western," and instead maintains that the "Western" prefix of "Western esotericism" refers rather to the Western concern with esotericism,

[4] Wouter Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 13.

i.e., the construction of discarded knowledge itself that is incompatible with the evolving religious and scientific mainstreams of modernity.[5] Today, Western esotericism itself has become a bespoke religious identity amongst practitioners of diverse occult streams deriving from European traditions with an expressed concern for recovering and transmitting those streams.

As Hanegraaff and others have noted, this construction of esotericism as a unified tradition or current, sometimes expressed as the "inner tradition" of a major world religion that shares affinity with other inner traditions, is ahistorical.[6] Yet the notion of a perennial tradition as expressed through a particular religion (understood as a bounded and discrete entity) while simultaneously expressing a transhistorical, original gnosis is highly persistent. As we will see, late modern esoteric Christian organizations and practitioners will adopt this rhetoric as a method to legitimate their understandings of Christianity, but also to defend the value of Christianity as a world religion with an "inner" dimension comparable to Eastern religions, amidst an increasingly secular culture and mounting criticism of its institutional forms. As Robin Amis states somewhat polemically in his *A Different Christianity*, "faiths such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam are today attempting to make their inner tradition better known, yet," through the accidents of modernity, "the Western churches either claim that there is no tradition of inner or esoteric knowledge, or reserve it to a clergy who themselves are not expected to give too much credence to it. This has forced countless thousands to turn to Eastern faiths for no other reason than because their inner teachings are more accessible than our own."[7]

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[5] Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism,* 15.

[6] Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism,* 12.

[7] Amis, *A Different Christianity,* viii-ix.

As Tomoko Masuzawa has shown, the Western, post-Enlightenment construction of "world religions" is bound up in 19th century projects of Euro-Christian self-definition amidst rapid industrialization, colonial contacts, secularization, and the development of positivism and rational science.[8] In many ways, the contemporary popular view of Dharmic religions as tolerant, rational, and psychological as opposed to doctrinal and intolerant Judeo-Christianity is a matter of projection upon north Indian Sanskrit scriptures that were "discovered" by Europeans without scholarly consideration of living Buddhist communities.[9] What they saw in Buddhist scriptures merely affirmed their own hopes and expectations for the progress of civilization, including a rational religion. The late 19th and 20th century pop-cultural appropriations of Buddhism and Dharmic faiths is largely a legacy of "racist love," an expression of "an already established disillusionment with Christianity and … a budding fascination with alternative modes of moral and spiritual understanding" based on racial stereotypes of the East as more spiritual and peaceful.[10] This is the background upon which modern esoteric Christians seek to define the inner dimension of their faith: Christians don't have to go to the East, itself a Euro-Christian construction, but can instead go "further in" their own traditions. This crisis of Euro-Christian identity continues despite the rise of secularization in America in the late 20th and early 21st century, stoking the need to reinvent and to some degree defend "true" Christianity from its institutional, moralistic instantiations with an appeal to a kind of esoteric universalism that places Christian wisdom on a par with the humanistic mysticisms of an eroticized religious Other. In the words of Episcopal priest and teacher of contemplative prayer, Cynthia Bourgeault:

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[8] Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

[9] Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions,* 121-138.

[10] Jane Naomi Iwamura, "The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture," in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. B.D. Forbes and J.H. Mahan (Los Angeles: University of California Press, n.d.), 30.

> We're living in an era in which the Christian monolith is breaking down. … In other words, we're living in an era right now which some would call a major paradigm shift where there's an opportunity … to really open up the core questions again and ask, "What is it that we mean by 'Christianity?' What is this filter we're looking through? Who is this Master that we profess and confess in our life as we call ourselves Christian?"[11]'

Bourgeault's response, along with other esoteric Christians, is to recast Jesus Christ as a "wisdom teacher" of "*sophia perennis*"[12] and Christianity a religion of "classic esoteric teachings, echoed and confirmed throughout the universal wisdom tradition."[13]

Towards a Typology of Late Modern Christian Esotericism

Having briefly sketched the backdrop of late modern Christian esotericism, I will turn now to the specific religious groupings that have arisen in the context of the late 20th and early 21st century United States. This survey will treat three strains of late modern Christian esotericism. The first is what I have called the liturgical-contemplative—those traditions that have arisen from mainline liturgical churches and offer supplemental techniques derived from Dharmic forms of religious practice, specifically Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation. Next is the New Age revelation religious groupings that derive in part from the themes of 19th century Theosophy and 20th century spiritualism, namely A Course in Miracles (ACIM), though a wide variety of New Age movements that claim Jesus as an important Ascended Master in their pantheon are relevant. Finally, I will discuss the ecclesial neo-Gnostic groups, which derive from

[11] Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind—A New Perspective on Christ and His Message* (Boston: Shambhala, 2008), 3.

[12] Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*, 4.

[13] Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus,* 53.

the French fin de siècle occult revival and position themselves as a valid but subterranean current of apostolic Christianity, often maintaining their own churches.

Practitioners of liturgical-contemplative traditions movements do not uniformly describe themselves or their methods as "esoteric." Indeed, these movements, particularly Centering Prayer, are by far the best represented within mainline churches today. A brief search for Centering Prayer groups on the website of the practice's primary organization, Contemplative Outreach, will show that numerous groups can be found in a variety of mainline church settings, but especially within Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches.[14] This is largely due to the denominational affiliations of the founders of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation, both Benedictine monastics in full communion with the Catholic Church until their deaths. I have chosen to include these practices within the umbrella of late modern esoteric Christianity due to the popularity of these practices within properly esoteric circles (the parish of the neo-Gnostic church I attended between 2021-2022, for example, hosted Centering Prayer workshops), but also because many of the popularizers, including the founders, have used the language of perennialism and esotericism. Fr. Thomas Keating, the progenitor of the Centering Prayer method, himself used the language of esotericism to describe this approach to religion later in his career.[15]

ACIM, as the sole representative of the New Age revelation strain of esoteric Christianity, is (in contrast to the liturgical-contemplative traditions) highly divergent from historic Christian creeds and traditions as well as current mainline Christian organizations.

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[14] See "Contemplative Outreach Chapter," Webpage, *Contemplative Outreach Chapters,* accessed November 14, 2023, https://www.cochapters.com/, for current listings of Centering Prayer groups.

[15] See Fr. Thomas Keating, Rollie Stanich, and Ken Wilber, "Esoteric Christianity: Two Kinds of Religion," Webpage, *Integral Life,* 2009, https://integrallife.com/esoteric-christianity-two-kinds-religion/. This framing is especially prominent in his later collaborations with integral philosopher Ken Wilber.

However, ACIM study groups are still hosted (though rarely) by some mainline denominations, notably mainline Protestant, and are entirely absent from Roman Catholic spaces. Examples of current host organizations found in an internet search include Episcopal,[16] Unitarian Universalist,[17] as well as several new-thought Unity churches,[18] among others. In terms of its institutional presence, ACIM is most closely related to the ecclesial neo-Gnostic variety of esoteric Christianity in that they often congregate outside of mainline Christian spaces, even when they sometimes find themselves renting space from churches. Study groups, however, are usually independently organized, with a few organizations having physical premises devoted to the study of ACIM, such as the Rocky Mountain Miracle Center in Denver, CO.[19] The lack of an institution and hierarchical structure seems intentional and is something that is viewed favorably by members.[20]

ACIM is a channeled text that was received by Columbia University psychologist Helen Schucman in 1973 that purports to represent the words of Jesus Christ.[21] It redefines traditional religious concepts such as the fall and redemption in terms of a kind of neo-Vedantic non-dual philosophy. For example, humanity's separation from God is illusory and requires a shift in perspective to dissolve the artifice of duality: "Until the 'separation,' which is the meaning of the

[16] "Episcopal Asset Map," Webpage, *St. Mark's Episcopal Church*, accessed November 14, 2023, https://www.episcopalassetmap.org/dioceses/diocese-rio-grande/list/st-marks-episcopal-church.

[17] "Faith/Focus Groups: A Course in Miracles," Webpage, *Eno River Unitarian Fellowship*, accessed December 17, 2023, https://www.eruuf.org/faith/focus-groups/course-in-miracles.html.

[18] "A Course in Miracles," Webpage, *Unity New Thought Center*, accessed November 14, 2023, https://www.ntunity.org/course-miracles.

[19] "Rocky Mountain Miracle Center," Webpage, *Rocky Mountain Miracle Center*, accessed November 14, 2023, https://www.rockymountainmiraclecenter.org/.

[20] McKinley Smoot, "Helen Schucman and A Course in Miracles: Personal Revelation to Scripture," *Intermountain Journal of Religious Studies* 9, no. 1 (2018): 53–56.

[21] Smoot, "Helen Schucman and A Course in Miracles," 44-45.

'fall,' nothing was lacking. There were no needs at all. Needs arise only when you deprive yourself. You act according to the particular order of needs you establish. This, in turn, depends on your perception of what you are. A sense of separation from God is the only lack you really need correct."[22] Practitioners study the ACIM workbook, which includes lessons for each day of the year, and the "text," composed of the channeled messages dictated by Schucman. It is important to note that there have been substantial criticisms of this group from both Christians and non-Christians. Some have claimed that ACIM's claims about the illusory nature of suffering invalidate real, sociohistorical oppression and is thus inconsistent with gospel values.[23] However, it is equally true of the other varieties of esoteric Christianity, and many other new religious movements that adopt therapeutic methods, that their individualism eclipses wider social concerns. The goal is not the reform of society, but rather the reform of the individual through esoteric practice. It is also important to note the convergence of esoteric Christianity with larger themes of therapeutic, individualistic, and practice-based forms of spirituality in late modern, middle-class American culture. ACIM practitioners value its "orthopraxical nature" and the transformative effects the Course has on their lives.[24]

The last category of late modern esoteric Christianity, the ecclesial neo-Gnostic, are comprised of groups that have either an actual or perceived connection to the French fin de siècle occult revival and the occult societies and Gnostic restoration churches that arose from it.[25]

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[22] "A Course in Miracles," Webpage, *A Course in Miracles*, 2023 (1975), https://acim.org/acim/en (ACIM, T-1.VI.1:6–2:1).

[23] See Matthew Fox, "A Course in Miracles," Blog, *Progressive Christianity*, 2019, https://progressivechristianity.org/resources/a-course-in-miracles-2/.

[24] Smoot, "Helen Schucman and A Course in Miracles," 55.

[25] For more on the genealogies of the French occult revival, see Tobias Churton, *Occult Paris: The Lost Magic of the Belle Époque* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2016).

Ecclesial neo-Gnosticism is closely associated with Stephan Hoeller in North America, a Belgian migrant who founded the first Gnostic church in the United States in Hollywood in the 1960s, the Ecclesia Gnostica. He has written extensively on contemporary Gnostic spirituality and remains an active figure within this milieu. Notable active organizations include the Ecclesia Gnostica, the Apostolic Johannite Church, and The Gnostic Apostolic Church. The churches evince a highly complex engagement with historic Christianity. Deriving from 19th century France, most liturgical Gnostic services are modeled on the Roman Catholic mass, replete with a celebration of the Eucharist, scripture readings from their own bespoke canons which include the Nag Hammadi and other esoteric texts, and volunteer clergy modeled on the traditional minor and major orders of the preconciliar Catholic Church. They are also the most likely to appropriate "esoteric" or "Western esoteric" as a descriptor for their practice, understanding themselves to exist within the "historic" stream that produced the 19th century occult revivals in France and England and organizations such as the Theosophical Society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and the Martinist Order. The website of the Apostolic Johannite Church, for example, describes the group as an "Esoteric, Gnostic, Christian Church within the Historic Apostolic Succession," and discusses the church's relationship to other esoteric organizations including Freemasonry, Templar orders, and Martinism.[26]

Practitioners may read tarot, practice astrology, have dual membership in neopagan groups, or practice ritual magic. They might also have a practice of Centering Prayer or Christian meditation. There is an emphasis within contemporary neo-Gnostic Christianity to reincorporate esoteric practice and belief within the fold of historical Christianity as their divorce is often seen as an aberration of Constantinian Christianity. Thus, the website of the AJC claims that "For

[26] "Frequently Asked Questions," Webpage, *The Apostolic Johannite Church*, accessed November 14, 2023, https://www.johannite.org/.

centuries, gnostic ideas flourished within the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Countless Catholic and Orthodox Bishops died peacefully in their sleep after lifetimes of preaching and practicing gnostic teaching. These people contributed, debated, and crafted much of what we see of liturgical culture today."[27] The Gnostic Apostolic Church provides an extensive genealogy of their church, documenting the consecrations of their bishops to substantiate their claim to apostolic succession.[28] For neo-Gnostic churches, the inner tradition is submerged as it is for other proponents of esoteric Christianity. However, in their view, the Christian inner tradition (synonymous with ancient and revivalist expressions of Gnosticism) was intentionally suppressed in the historical development of Christian orthodoxy. Key to the recovery mission is the justification of ancient Gnosticism as apostolic Christianity and their identification with historical Gnostic revival movements, thus evincing an attitude of religious primitivism.

Themes of Christian Esotericism

Despite the divergent origins of these groups, their different understandings of themselves as "esoteric," and the variety of relationships they hold with mainstream Christian organizations, a number of common themes and concerns can be derived from the organizations surveyed above that justifies describing these groups as esoteric Christian formations and for conceptualizing esoteric Christianity as a unique discursive phenomenon with institutional consequences in late modern American Christianity. Commonalities include themes of religious modernity, namely individualism, therapeutic approaches to religion, primitivism in the search

[27] "Frequently Asked Questions."

[28] "A Historical Brief of the Gnostic Catholic Ecclesia," Webpage, *The Gnostic Apostolic Church*, accessed November 14, 2023, https://www.apostolicgnosis.org/history.html.

for historical or transhistorical alternatives to Christianity's current state, and unique practice-oriented approaches to spirituality.

In her work on the International Churches of Christ, Kathleen Jenkins notes the preponderance of values of relationality and therapy in late modern American religious culture.[29] The sectarian Christian movement she studied had highly specialized and routinized ways of enacting these values. In different ways, esoteric Christianity reproduces these values both discursively and practically. Fr. Thomas Keating branded his Centering Prayer method as "divine therapy," in which the self is healed of its sense of alienation from God, inculcated in early childhood (understood in his interpretation as Original Sin).[30] Much can be gleaned from his reinterpretation of traditional doctrine. Here, an ancient doctrine is recast as a problem of developmental psychology that can be resolved with a therapeutic method. This redefinition reflects the value of modern psychology and therapeutic methods within mainstream and alternative religious movements. This also represents an attempt to revitalize or defend traditional Christian doctrines through esoteric interpretive practices by which authoritative religious claims about the nature of reality are inverted to reflect personal, psychological experience. Another example of the latter point would be Carl Jung's reinterpretation of Western esoteric concepts such as alchemy and Gnosticism according to his psychological theories.

Jung's reinterpretation of ancient Gnosticism is important to the self-understanding of contemporary neo-Gnostics. Indeed, Jung is something of a Gnostic saint, even having a feast

[29] Kathleen Jenkins, *Awesome Families: The Promise of Healing Relationships in the International Churches of Christ* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 13-15.

[30] Fr. Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), 37-63.

commemorating his death in the Ecclesia Gnostica.[31] His articulations of Gnosticism form the basis for much of contemporary Gnostic theology, and thus the theme of therapeutic spirituality is at its core.[32] The practices in which neo-Gnostics engage—usually drawn from the historic stream of Christian practice, including the Eucharist, the Divine Office, and others, in combination with practices such as Centering Prayer, Christian Meditation, or ritual magic—are employed to a therapeutic end, using Gnosticism's mythic frame of reintegration back into the Godhead.

Similar therapeutic language is employed towards healing the apparent chasm between God and humankind in ACIM. Curiously, part of the foundational myth of ACIM includes a dialogue between Helen Schucman and her colleague, psychiatrist Bill Thetford, regarding Thetford's frustration about the way that clinical psychology was being practiced at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. Shortly after, Schucman dictated the text of ACIM.[33] ACIM's founding narrative positions the Course as a correction of modern psychotherapy, offering healing through the transcendence of the ego and reunification with God.

Closely related to the theme of therapeutic spirituality in late modern esoteric Christianity is the theme of the True Self.[34] The liturgical-contemplative current has the most consistent and developed theology of the True Self amongst the three currents. This has much to do with the

[31] "Meditations: Commemoration of the Death of Carl Gustav Jung (June 6)," Webpage, *The Gnostic Society*, accessed November 14, 2023, http://gnosis.org/ecclesia/lect135.htm.

[32] On the importance of Jung to contemporary neo-Gnosticism, see "C.G. Jung and Gnostic Tradition: Gnosis, Gnosticism, and Jungian Psychology," Webpage, *The Gnostic Society Library*, accessed November 14, 2023, http://gnosis.org/gnostic-jung/.

[33] Smoot, "Helen Schucman and A Course in Miracles," 45.

[34] Peter Clarke, *New Religions in Global Perspective: A Study of Religious Change in the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 7-9.

programmatic nature of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation practices, their centralized leadership (at least in the early and middle years of the organizations), and organizational structures that reproduced the teachings of the founders, particularly Father Thomas Keating. In short, Keating espouses an evolutionary model of human consciousness informed by transpersonal psychology. In Keating's view, human history has developed from a state of primordial consciousness (the typhonic) concerned mostly with reproduction within which humans were unable to distinguish between natural and supernatural phenomena.[35] The goal of human life is to attain a fully rational consciousness which Keating contends remains unrealized for most of humanity but was made available on a wide scale through the teachings and example of Jesus Christ.[36] The practice of Centering Prayer is a method for expediting this process, thereby healing "the emotional wounds of a lifetime"[37] along the way, which are the principle means by which this evolutionary psychology is recapitulated in the life of the individual. The natural course of human life leads to a sense of alienation from God which calcifies the False Self.

In both Centering Prayer and ACIM, the False Self is essentially an illusion. In ACIM, this takes a metaphysical cadence compared to the evolutionary-historical cadence of Keating's model. As such, ACIM has some resonance with both modern and ancient formulations of Gnosticism. The separation of spirit from matter and God from humanity is only apparent—though somewhat intractable upon the material plane. According to the ACIM workbook, there is nothing to be done about this unfortunate situation but to work to consciously realize it. ACIM

[35] Fr. Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1992), 33.

[36] Keating, *Invitation to Love,* 48-51.

[37] Keating, *Invitation to Love,* 6.

is somewhat dismissive of the experience of trauma and alienation. It doesn't recommend a course of practice other than the study of the text and the workbook, which produce a change in perception to rectify this situation, drawing on themes of positive mind and new thought spirituality.

Ecclesial Gnosticism has a less defined and more inconsistent approach to the True Self, connected to its diffuseness, commitment to individual interpretation and inspiration, and lack of centralized organization. However, most espouse a similar Platonic theme to the ACIM materials, that human separation from God is intractable but can be overcome through the experience of Gnosis. Moreover, the Gnostic quest involves the realization of the true, spiritual nature of the self. As Gnosticism scholar April DeConick writes, "The human being is also nous, or as the Gnostics preferred to call it, pneuma or spirit. This transcendent dimension is nothing less than the supreme God's own life essence, his own life breath or spirit, captured deep within the human psyche."[38] In contemporary neo-Gnosticism, the gnostic experience is cultivated through engagement in revamped Christian liturgical practices, individual practices drawn from the Western esoteric milieu, or Christian contemplative practices like Centering Prayer.

In their therapeutic emphasis and their commitment to recovering the True Self, late modern Christianity has a unique emphasis on practice that, in some ways, sets it apart from historic Christianity but unites it in others. For Christian Meditators, commitment to meditation both encourages deeper ties to their denominations and promotes "inner" ecumenical unity.[39] The difference in approach to practice between orthodox and esoteric Christianity lies in the

[38] April DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 66.

[39] Jonathan Mermis-Cava, "An Anchor and a Sail: Christian Meditation as the Mechanism for a Pluralist Religious Identity," *Sociology of Religion* 70, no. 4 (2009): 433.

nature of the practices involved, while commitment to practice, especially practices understood as prayer or sacrament among the liturgical-contemplative and ecclesial neo-Gnostic varieties, are points of convergence. A Course in Miracles, consistent with its eschewal of traditional Christian forms, terms, and organizational structures, is the most divergent in terms of practice.

Late Modern Christian Esotericism as a New Religious Movement

Given the emergence of an explicitly defined Christian esotericism in the last two centuries, analyzing it as a new religious movement may help further bear out its import within the ecosystem of late modern American Christianity. However, the diffuse and decentralized nature of modern Christian esoteric groups present challenges to the sociological study of this phenomenon. Though these groups share practices and themes, they are not as traditionally organized as the new religious movements that sociologists usually study. As Richard Smoley wrote in his seminal *Inner Christianity,* inner or esoteric Christianity supersedes exoteric religious institutions by definition; it centers the individual's experience and advancement within the Christian mythopoetic.[40] These groups sometimes organize, but usually in fleeting arrangements that are often symbiotic with larger bodies. Secondly, as discussed above, these groups do not all self-consciously adopt the term "esoteric Christian." Christian esotericism is largely a discursive phenomenon that I argue describes a range of practices at varying degrees of divergence from historic Christianity in late modernity. However, I maintain that it is still useful from a scholarly perspective due to the convergence of themes and concerns discussed above. Third, the range of responses to historic Christianity make it difficult to assess esoteric Christianity from the perspective of a divergence-convergence model for new religious

[40] Smoley, *Inner Christianity,* 10.

movements. Strictly organizational typologies or those that center charismatic leaders are therefore inappropriate in this context.

In many ways, esoteric Christianity can be thought of as a revitalization movement. Writing primarily on the 20th century charismatic Catholicism, which he defines as a renewal movement, Joseph Fichter writes:

> The goal of the renewal movement is personal spiritual reform not organized social reform, but this does not imply the absence of social concern. The movement's basic conviction is that better society can emerge only when people have become better, yet it would be completely erroneous to interpret this as an individualistic and self-centered attitude.[41]

In accord with the renewal movement's emphasis on the primacy of individual development, esoteric Christianity's participants extoll the individual pursuit of divine knowledge and wisdom, and many emphasize its cosmic import. For example, the method of Centering Prayer, as we have seen, is positioned as a method of consciously furthering the evolution of humanity. Roy Wallis situates the renewal movement within the framework of world-accommodating religious movements—a third category distinct from world-affirming and world-rejecting movements. The concern of the world-accommodating movement is to advocate for individual, experiential spirituality, implying a critique of prevailing religious organizations. These tend to be "agnostic" in relationship to the "world," and, "While it may strengthen the individual for secular affairs and heighten his enjoyment of life, these are not the justifications for its practice. The benefits it offers are not of the thorough-going instrumental variety to be found in world-affirming movements."[42] It is appropriate to characterize late modern esoteric Christianity in both ways, as

[41] Quoted in Roy Wallis, "Three Types of New Religious Movement," in *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*, ed. Lorne L. Dawson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 55.

[42] Wallis, "Three Types," 55.

a renewal movement similar to charismatic Catholicism and as world-accommodating, in that it seeks to reclaim the supposed inner dimension of Christianity for the individual, while remaining ambivalent about the status of the world and, indeed, the preservation of historic Christian churches.

This broad definition accounts for many of the themes I have identified within the currents of late modern esoteric Christianity. All espouse a True Self that can be discerned beneath social conditioning which may or may not be bound up with the course of human evolution. While not primary, the liberation of the individual, it is implied, has wider social implications. In centering prayer, the primary goal is "divine therapy" and direct spiritual experience over against dogmatic propositions. Furthermore, "divine therapy" is advocated with the explicit caveat that it is not for worldly advancement but for union with God. ACIM and neo-Gnostic churches see this similarly: the world is compromised, but healing the breach between the human and the divine is possible and desirable. Yet, for many adherents, the vague social penumbra around these goals also seems to transpose into an optimism around the direction of the historic Christian churches, the desire for reform, and reintegration of the esoteric into the exoteric. The adoption of several mainline churches of Centering Prayer is evidence of this. Cynthia Bourgeault has described her hopes that contemplative spirituality and especially Centering Prayer might revitalize the historic Church rather than detract from it.[43] Thus, at least for the liturgical-contemplative branch of esoteric Christianity, there is an explicit impulse towards renewal of the Church.

Most of the neo-Gnostic churches have described themselves as valid members of the historic apostolic succession; indeed, many have gone to great lengths to document this, hence

[43] Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Chicago: Cowley Publications, 2004), 155-160.

their description in this paper as "ecclesial." In contrast to the liturgical-contemplative current, which tends to see itself as revitalizing—if not merely drawing out—hidden themes of the historic Church, the ecclesial neo-Gnostic tends to refer to the Church in more metaphysical and in some ways disembodied terms. The "Church" is the historic apostolic succession, which Gnosticism has been denied access to but has existed within, but is not any particular "church." The goal, then, is to relink Gnosticism to the historic apostolic succession, legitimating Gnosticism and revitalizing the apostolic Church. ACIM, consistent with its situation in the other typologies examined thus far, is highly idiosyncratic in this regard. It seeks to claim the person of Jesus Christ, while attempting to reject all other elements of historic Christianity. An impulse towards renewal is implicit here as it provides an individualistic method to interface with the Christian story for those disaffected by "religion," a large base of its believers. An excerpt from the core text seems to bear this out: "Let me be to you the symbol of the end of guilt, and look upon your brother as you would look on me. Forgive me all the sins you think the Son of God committed. And in the light of your forgiveness he will remember who he is, and forget what never was."[44] By admonishing the practitioner to "Forgive me the sins you think the Son of God committed," the text seems to invite the practitioner into an inner relationship with Jesus beyond the structures of the historic church and its presumed transgressions.

Esoteric Christianity can be best understood as a world-accommodating renewal movement, though this should be highly nuanced with regard given to each group's particular self-understandings, group orientation, and level of conformity to historic Christianity. Overall, the three esoteric Christian currents seek to reclaim Christian spirituality for the individual, with

[44] "A Course in Miracles" (T-19.IV.B.6).

varying degrees of understanding of how this movement towards the inner dimension of faith will interact with historic Christianity and the world.

Conclusion

In this paper, I've examined what I've identified as three major currents of esoteric Christianity that have been articulated in late modernity: the liturgical-contemplative, New Age revelation, and ecclesial neo-Gnostic varieties. Though all of these have precedents, in their manifestations in the late 20th and early 21st century United States they have converged on a number of themes and understand themselves to have similar objectives. Though their self-identification as "esoteric Christian" varies and is highly dependent upon the individual practitioner or adherent, all espouse a hidden or at least latent dimension of the Christian faith that they seek to express. They draw on similar textual traditions and similar histories and can be interpreted as a response to modernist religious concerns around secularization, pluralism, and institutional decline.

A major concern of esoteric Christian writers is to defend an idealized and not necessarily historical Christianity against trends besetting the church, including institutionalism and secularism. They often appropriate the "inner tradition" rhetoric identified by Hanegraaff[45] that assumes an esoteric dimension of each of the world's major religious tradition broadly divided along East-West lines—an Eastern inner tradition common to the Dharmic faiths and a Western tradition of the Abrahamic faiths and particularly Christianity. The crisis of Euro-Christian self-identity in the face of globalization, secularization, and the legacy of Enlightenment rationalism

[45] Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism,* 10-14.

has been a consistent theme of modernity, and the "esoteric Christian" can be seen to be engaging in this dialogue.

Esoteric Christianity furthermore engages in a number of common themes to new religious movements or approaches to traditional religion since the second half of the twentieth century, namely a therapeutic emphasis, the appeal to a True Self against a false self, and the emphasis on practice against doctrinal orthodoxy. These are all meant to delineate the inner dimension of Christian spirituality for the individual, over and against institutional formulations. This is consistent with the trend in American religion since the 1960s to emphasize experiential spirituality of the individual, which is unsurprising given that this is the milieu out of which many of the seminal writers and formulators of esoteric Christianity have derived their teachings.[46]

Finally, though difficult to assess given the elusive and highly idiosyncratic nature of esoteric Christian groups, I argue that the sociological construction of a world-accommodating, renewal-oriented movement best captures the shared concerns of this movement, though it requires heavy nuance towards the articulations of each of these groups, especially as they relate to historic Christian religious structures.

Though some research has been conducted on Centering Prayer, Christian Meditation, and ACIM, there has not been a systematic study of esoteric Christian movements currently operating in the United States today. This paper is an attempt in this direction, though further ethnographic research is needed to flesh out the concerns, aspirations, and desires of individual adherents within each of these movements. When they do gather in groups, these groups tend to

[46] Robert Wuthnow, "The New Spiritual Freedom," in *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*, ed. Lorne L. Dawson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 102-105.

be rather small, raising some concerns about the longevity, and indeed the social impact of the concrete formations of late modern esoteric Christianity. This also warrants a closer examination of the perpetuation of esotericism in digital cultures. Yet, at least as a discursive phenomenon, there are still a network of writers, publishers, and clerics that are invested in its perpetuation in the "real world." Regardless of concrete social expression, esoteric Christianity remains a compelling if understated theme in late modern American religious culture and is worth understanding.

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