

1-1-1997

Contemptus Mundi Means "...Bound for the Promised Land...": Religion from the Site of Cultural Marronage

Vincent L. Wimbush
Claremont Graduate University

Recommended Citation

Wimbush, Vincent L. "Contemptus Mundi Means "...Bound for the Promised Land...": Religion from the Site of Cultural Marronage." *The Papers of the Henry Luce III Fellows in Theology*, Vol.2, ed. Jonathan Strom. Association Of Theological Schools, 1997. 131-161.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the CGU Faculty Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in CGU Faculty Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

Contemptus Mundi Means
“...Bound for the Promised Land...”:
Religion from the Site
of Cultural Marronage

Vincent L. Wimbush
UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
NEW YORK

On Being Both Problem and Promise:
Finding My Scholarly Self and Voice

The basic assumption behind this project is that all humanistic inquiries more or less explicitly involve self-discovery. I have chosen to try to be more rather than less explicit. I have realized for some time now that I am both a problem and a promise for the primary field in which I was academically socialized: biblical (New Testament) studies as defined and practiced by the guilds of biblical scholars in North America.¹ I have provided enough evidence that I can “play the game” that the guilds require in terms of publications, research projects, and general scholarly orientation. And as such things go, and for whatever they are worth, I have been appropriately “rewarded” or “affirmed” by these guilds. There are even times, though not very often, when it seems that I along with some others quite paradoxically represent both the promise and present problem of still very conservative guilds, which have almost no members who are persons of color and thus lack their influence and voice. Nevertheless, through my publications, teaching, and lectures, through the guild politics and guild initiatives that I have either prompted or supported, I have consistently represented part of the outsider’s/newcomer’s critique and the potential undermining of much that these guilds have long represented.

Three anecdotes help make the point. Anecdote one: Several years ago, during a luncheon in his honor, a very distinguished biblical scholar said to me that he had been watching my career development, was impressed by my growth, and thought that I would really go places one day if I would but stay the course—that is, not get

distracted by “trendy” movements. The larger context of conversation that day about the guild made it clear to me that things “trendy” in the mind of this colleague included almost all those things that had initially drawn me to and had continued to hold my interest in the guild! Looking me squarely and seriously in the face, this scholar had not an inkling of an idea just how patronizing and racist he sounded; he actually thought himself the liberal-progressive and came close to offering himself as role model, even mentor.

Anecdote two: In informal conversation at a recent conference of historians of the early church, a female colleague of my generation reported the ironic and histrionic reaction of an older internationally recognized male colleague. Upon facing the prospect of a young, recently “doctored” African-American female with clear and up-front interests in “black hermeneutics” joining him as a colleague, he is reported to have said in words that only he could have uttered: “But she would change the whole *complexion* of the program!” The emphasis, incredibly, is mine and that of the female colleague reporting this incident—not the senior colleague’s. This person reportedly did not have a clue about the ironic, naive, and racist nature of his remarks. Academic biblical studies of the type that he had been associated with for decades and his program could not possibly have conceptual and intellectual room for the likes of the young woman referenced. To add to the poignancy of the situation, this particular conference was, except for me, totally without persons of color.

Anecdote three: Actually, this one is the most frightening and poignant for me. It points to no one particular incident but rather represents in a less dramatic but no less serious manner the lingering challenge I face as a biblical scholar and historian of religion. It is the now decades old sentiment expressed in reaction to curricular and conceptualization reform efforts that is most depressing. Biblical scholars, most especially those with appointments in graduate schools with doctoral students, argue that the academic study of the Bible should be taught only according to certain paradigms and certain critical methods. No matter how creative and radical a particular scholar’s work might be, somehow the reigning paradigms for doctoral work in biblical studies are for the most part quite resistant to change, notwithstanding some adjustments here and there. The European, particularly German, inheritance, remains clear and intact. Despite all the newer postmodern methods, there is still the

basic emphasis on the historical-, literary-, and theological-critical exegesis of ancient texts and the reconstruction of ancient history. The agenda is ostensibly to be for the most part “scientific” and “objective” in interpretation, a reflection of solidarity with Western rationalistic Enlightenment assumptions, as well as a defense against the long-standing ecclesiastical hegemony of interpretation.

But there is delicious irony in the development of the critical study of the Bible in reaction to the bias of ecclesiastical readings. The popular assumptions about the split between church and academy are usually facile and seriously miss the point, especially concerning biblical scholarship. Exegesis in the history of biblical scholarship, no matter what the methodological or hermeneutical games played or no matter how sophisticated, critical, or obscure they are, has become fundamentally an insider’s activity, the biblical exegete functioning much like the shaman in “primitive” religions.² There has actually been very little of biblical or early church scholarship—Western European Protestant, Euro-American Protestant and Catholic, bourgeois, capitalist, and modernist—that has not been the activity of the cultural and/or ecclesiastical insider. To be sure, there have along the way been controversies and squabbles between church and academy. But these have not fundamentally threatened any particular dominant sociopolitical order or religious/theological position. On the contrary, the dominant focus on the texts in academic biblical studies actually has come to reflect and support the Euro-American cultural domestication, naturalization, and co-optation of biblical and early church traditions. Ecclesiastical control of interpretation in some places over time has been forced on account of general socio-political, including religious, reforms and pressures to relax a bit. But the history of scholarship suggests that biblical scholarship had far less influence upon the dominant religiocultural ethos than it has been influenced by it.

But that the rationalistic, “scientific” study of the Bible has clearly served and still serves an agenda that is culture-specific cannot be denied. The “critical” methods that define academic biblical studies now function not so much to analyze and criticize the complex of traditions that produced and were in turn set in motion by the texts, but far more often, merely to support a type of naturalization—that is, Europeanization and Euro-Americanization of things Christian. In either their atomistic literary/historical or sometimes

somewhat broader but still culturally captive theological approaches, the agenda seems to be merely to throw light on certain aspects of or “facts” about Christianity which after more than a century of such efforts, has been taken for granted as the historical stream of religious traditions in the modern Western world.

Without several conceptual steps backward from the details of ancient texts and histories, and then several steps toward a problematization of the phenomenon of “scripturalizing”³ itself and of the sociocultural, political effects of the traditions produced by it, the agenda of biblical studies can be seen to service the ideological interests of the dominant, literate, middle- and upper-class religious-confessional communities. Such an agenda is not wholly indefensible, but it cannot be claimed to be other than what it is by virtue of the paradigms and constructs that determine it: a discourse in service of a rather specific demographic slice of society. It should not claim to be more than that.

The anecdotes above and the sentiments that grow out of them make the point about promise and problem very clear. They point to the complexity of my views about, participation in, reception by, and effect on the scholarly guilds to which I belong. Such complexity is due to many factors, not the least of which is the *different site of enunciation*⁴ I occupy—a site not altogether unique or privileged, but certainly different from that site that has been assumed to be of central importance since the beginnings of modern biblical scholarship and early church history in Europe and in North America. The site for the origination, development, and flowering of European-North American academic biblical studies was and remains the nexus between the (European state supported and North American private, elite) academy and the (European state- and North American cultural Protestant “high”) church.

Again, I occupy a different site of enunciation and interpretation; I have been and remain outside the dominant and privileged circle of tradition, orientation, and discourse in the United States. In spite of my academic socialization experience in the Harvard New Testament doctoral program and in spite of my teaching experiences in schools historically that have been identified with mainstream religious, theological, and intellectual views, my own rather different views about biblical studies and early church history as discourse were fated sooner or later to emerge from their years of submersion

in academic-political-cultural captivity and seek to be heard and read. My issues and questions about the Bible are different simply because of who I am and whence I come, because of those to whom I speak and those with whom I live. It is simply no longer possible for me to engage the Bible, or the world for that matter, through the categories and constructs and assumptions of others, certainly not the Euro-American academic-theological paradigm for the engagement of the Bible.

So I cannot begin simply with *the text*, with the Bible, as scholars of the New Testament and early church studies on the whole claim they must do, as though it were clear why the text is important and should be engaged, nor simply in some part of the Western construct of “late antiquity,” as though it were agreed why that period is pivotal. Nor can I begin research, as biblical studies and early church history have since their modern beginnings, with the unconfessed, unproblematized concerns and assumptions of Europe and white America. I must begin in *my world*, *with my world*. I must begin with the notion that *the Bible as my contemporaries and I have it, is not an ancient but a modern, a late twentieth-century, document*. This is because as an African American—a member of the African diaspora that has had to undergo and survive America—I am a “modern.”⁵ Thus I must begin with the fact of the sociopolitical givenness and subsequent historical cultural transformation of that givenness of the Bible in the world into which I was born, in which I first discovered and strove to cultivate my self. No reference to ancient texts or histories can be justified or can make sense to me at this juncture unless there is first a coming to terms with the cultural givenness and cultural engagement and manipulation of such in my present. Very few other matters are more important to me than the understanding of this matter.

Biblical Studies as Concern with My Present

This essay is an exercise in a type of religious criticism—namely, analysis of an aspect of some sociocultural representations and some sociopolitical effects of religion in contemporary culture and society.

The stated interests and objectives of such criticism are deliberately broad; they determine neither the particular disciplinary or field orientations and methods to be employed, nor the foci or twists that should characterize the project. My identity and social location as a “modern,” forty-something African-American male, a member of a diasporic community that has had to endure the New World and western European hegemony in general, including its legitimating religious world-views and traditions, and my identity and social location as a historian of religion with training in the New Testament and early Christianity are determinative of the type of engagement, foci, and twists with which I engage religious criticism.

No one aspect or part of my identity or social location in isolation determines the character of what follows. Therefore, this essay—and the intellectual project it announces and outlines—should not be too quickly categorized by readers. As an intellectual project it should be classified neither as simply African-American studies with a strange foray into the New Testament and early Christianity, nor as simply New Testament or early Christian studies with a curious Afrocentric nod. Not only are my identities more complex—not simply multiple, but actually overlapping and interactive, fluid and dynamic—than such labeling would suggest, but neither classification is for me personally, intellectually or professionally appealing or fulfilling. The categories juxtaposed but left unproblematized are too restrictive, too much a patchwork, an artificial collapsing of two different discourses that are still too often found to be static and predictable, with agenda that do not and perhaps very likely cannot accommodate one another. At any rate, they simply do not capture or reflect who I am and am becoming nor what I want to argue. Each, standing alone and unproblematized, forces me to deny my complex self and my recognition of the complexities—the origins and development, the diversification, the overlapping—of culture, culture formation and culture criticism. One without the other renders me intellectually, psychically, and spiritually empty or dishonest. Separation of the two is too high a price for me or anyone like me to pay.

I simply cannot engage in an intellectual project about African Americans that will not allow me to draw upon my training and sensibilities as a historian of Christian origins. Nor can I work on a project in early Christianity that will not afford me the opportunity to reconceptualize the phenomenon of Christianity as historical-

cultural construction by taking into consideration the historical and contemporary manipulations, interpretations and representations of it in religion-soaked, Christian, Bible-believing America, including African America, which has always in different ways and to different effect, been in pursuit of the (biblical) “primitive.”⁶ This means, of course, that the project to which this essay points must be defined neither as New Testament/Early Christian studies insofar as such a label implies that the appropriate agenda must ultimately be limited to antiquarianism or exegesis or culturally-captive theological discourse and interests, nor as African-American studies insofar as its agenda is ultimately only racial-ethnic cheerleading. I reject the tendencies in both discourses—found not everywhere, but enough in evidence to warrant the making of the point—toward fantastic, often uncritical claims about uniqueness. And I have no interest whatsoever in being part of those discursive formations that lead some unwittingly, others with a defensive vengeance, to support with abandon or without flinching essentialist or foundationalist positions.

I can no longer intellectually justify the writing of exegetical commentaries because they require me conceptually to privilege, to begin and end with, another conceptual and ideological place and agenda, with ancient texts and with ancient times and the methods deemed appropriate for their interpretation, a place alien to where I am psychically and intellectually located, foreign to what I am and am becoming. It is not that the interpretation of Luke or Paul or Augustine, the story of Perpetua, or the polemics of Athanasius is unimportant; rather, such interpretation must be relativized in importance, removed from its historically foundationalist position. No longer can it simply for me be considered the obvious (canon-, biblical-theological-, or tradition-mandated) endpoint. Its importance for me must now be established or justified, not presumed. And even if and when this is done, such an object of attention can be only a part of a larger, more complex cultural-critical intellectual project. It can be henceforth neither the beginning nor the end point of a project, only a middle part in the quest to come to terms with the complex present always in search of a past.

It may seem immediately obvious to some why I as an African American might have interest in the diverse intellectual discourse that has come to be called African-American studies. But precisely

because the matter may be thought to be so obvious—the interest in the self-discovery, the racial-cultural, ethnic cheerleading as it has been called by less-than-friendly detractors—it is all the more important to me that African-American studies not be embraced without including, even privileging, religion, especially the African-American religious folk traditions and orientations. Such privileging should inspire and warrant historical, phenomenological and comparative study to a degree that would more likely make the religious world that shaped me recognizable and subject to more credible and honest criticism and reform. In addition, the extent to which African-American religious ways are fathomed, a fascinating and special, if not unique, window to religiocultural transformation in general is opened.

I resonate very much with what historian and religion theorist Charles Long has argued about some matters pertinent here. One example is particularly illuminating: Long reports that when he was collecting some of his seminal essays for publication in the well-received book *Significations*, he, a well-recognized and highly respected scholar of long-standing who is also African American, had to stress that his wide-ranging essays—some of which include discussion of African-American religions, but all of which touch on the larger problems of theory and method in the study of religion—not be labeled and pitched simply as “Black Studies.” Long’s opposition, characteristically blunt with little possibility for any set of ears to miss the point, represented no embarrassment at all with respect to black studies, or things black in general. Quite the contrary, Long makes clear that the history of religions was undertaken by him as part of his quest to understand and come to terms with himself as a black man in America. This quest was not and could not have been undertaken by him within just any theoretical framework or set of assumptions. The study of things black within a theoretical framework and set of assumptions that begins with black existence as pathology, for example, would not do. Nor was for him appropriate to countenance that type of inquiry or discourse or historiographic tradition in which black existence did not figure at all or, if so, merely as exotica or caricature.

No, Long’s agenda was to conceptualize and analyze *homo religiosus*—the religious ways of human life, religious orientations, and religious impulses in general—in a manner that the religious

ways of black folk could and must be registered so that they could be analyzed in their own right but also rendered comparable to other religious orientations and impulses. The aim seems to have been to find a way to think about black religious existence so that it could be an authentic and powerful exemplum of historical existence in general and thereby contribute to the definition and shape of the theoretical paradigm for the investigation and understanding of the larger comparable universal phenomenon: historical human religious existence. Long ventured not so much to practice a black history of religions (as a part of black studies or black theology) as to conceptualize and practice the history of religions in a manner that black religious orientations could be rendered more accessible and understandable and could inform and shape the discipline, and thereby inform and shape world human discourse about important matters, as well come to a clearer understanding of the world that shaped him. He wrote:

My concern for the meaning of the religious reality of black Americans is obviously part and parcel of my scholarly discipline, the history of religions. This academic choice itself was probably rooted in a deeper, unconscious desire to make sense of my life as a black person in the United States. I was attracted to this scholarly orientation, for it was the only discipline that responded to the religious experience and expressions of my origins in the black community of this country. This in itself was illuminating. A note was struck when I felt a recognition of reality from my community of origins in the religious experiences and expressions of others far and near. There was, I felt, a mode of making sense of the experiences of my tradition that did not begin with a methodology of pathology, one of the primary American cultural and social scientific languages about blacks. I perceived that there was a structure for the universal in the human world that . . . expressed an opening for the authentic expression of others. Religion thus became the locus for a meaning that carried an archaic form; it was a root meaning and could thus become the basis for radical critical thought.⁷

According to Long, the study of religion meant beginning with

the modern situation, specifically with African Americans and their religious situation as those who were forced to undergo the making of the “New World.” It also meant problematizing that situation, relating it to the situation of others in the present and in the past. And it meant paying particular attention to what it means that the United States is the context in which certain religious orientations take place and certain religious formations are in evidence.

An African-American historian in touch with his or her hyphenated identity or alienation brought on by existence in the United States cannot avoid seeing the imperative of beginning every historical interpretive and analytic project with the problematic present in which the very presence of the African disturbs or interrupts the spinning of the (Euro-) American “medievalism” and its exceptionalist-foundationalist myth. In fact, all critical inquiry by African Americans must come to terms with what Long has rather euphemistically termed the “involuntary presence” of Africans, with what it means to be here, to think and live in what is the United States.

Although, as far as I know, Long has never characterized his work in this way, I would say that his influence, even if it was not his stated deliberate agenda, was essentially the *Americanization* of the critical and comparative study of religion, certainly in terms of the twists he gave to the theorizing and problematizing of religion. Inspired by and complementing his quest to understand himself as part of the diasporic black presence in the United States, Long’s focus on the United States provided a challenge to the comparative study of religion to consider the drama and pathos, the poignancies and ironies, the idealisms and the pathologies, the diversity of peoples, traditions, and expressions, the alternation between the archaic and the modern (and now an admixture of the two in the postmodern), the innovations and conservatisms, and the self-styled radicalisms, traditionalisms, and fundamentalisms that have come to characterize the United States. These features serve as springboard and intellectual impetus for the critical and comparative analysis of religion, and as such put a rather different spin on it.

Although biblical studies is generally and perhaps by necessity a conservative field and far less susceptible than most fields to the challenges being discussed here, I approach my work in biblical studies along similar lines. For such a field of inquiry to continue to

interest me as one who is conscious of his “involuntary presence” in the United States, it must be responsive to, or at least not hinder my exploration of, the study of the Bible construed as a type of cultural criticism—an analysis of the religious world-views and expressions of the contemporary (United States) American culture. This need grows out of my interest in understanding and coming to terms with the religious world-views and expressions of the African-American world that shaped me and that represents a particular socioreligious formation in its own right.

As is the case with a significant part of historically Protestant-dominated American culture in general, African-American religious culture has historically defined itself through the visions and rhetorics of the Bible. That the particular biblical visions and rhetorics privileged by African Americans would be different, or that the particular interpretive spins placed on the biblical visions and rhetorics emphasized in “Bible-soaked” America would be different for African Americans than for white Protestant America, should occasion no surprise. The Bible has assumed different and often contradictory roles among different groups at different points in their formation throughout American history. That this has been and continues to be the case, despite the realities of so-called secularization and social and religious diversification, suggests all the more why biblical studies as religious criticism, as critical analysis of the religious, its historical and contemporary expressions, orientations, and political effects in American culture, ought to be imperative. The rhetorics and visions of the Bible as a part of such investigation will make an enormous difference not only in the manner in which a significant segment or aspect of American culture is interpreted, but also in the construal of biblical studies itself.

The dominant orientations in biblical studies in the United States—historical and literary and liberal and conservative—assume that the Bible is important and should be the bottom line of interpretation, requiring ever-more exacting, more sophisticated, and more nuanced methods in correlation to the many different agenda and sites of interpretation. In the United States especially, differences in methods, conflicts within schools of interpretation, and controversies over substantive interpretive positions have abounded, even exploded, over the century of critical biblical interpretation, particularly during the last three decades. Yet on the part of biblical

scholars there has been in comparison little or no fathoming of the issue of the function of the Bible itself in the culture, on the role of the Bible as culture-making, culture-transforming, culture-legitimizing, and culture-opposing force.⁸ The guild of biblical scholars in the United States has tended on the whole not to focus attention on such matters.⁹ In point of fact, the guild has generally rewarded only those who have been consistently preoccupied with the busyness of interpretation of the trees. Interest in the whole forest, especially in the highest sites of the guild, is frowned upon. In demonstrating any serious interest in the forest as phenomenon one can be labeled as something other than a biblical scholar: a theologian (!), a philosopher, or a historian. I have on several occasions heard it said about me that my interest in the history of African- American biblical interpretation was evidence of my move away from biblical studies. Notions about the purview of the biblical scholar are so narrow, so traditional, and so entrenched that even conservative interests in and engagements of extracanonical literature are in some quarters viewed as suspect. Attention to the details of the texts or other material evidence for supposedly nonjudgmental, nonsectarian, scholarly reconstructive purposes is part of the official guild self-definition;¹⁰ it is certainly the reigning cry or at least the reigning assumption and value that helps define the authentic card-carrying member of the guild. The proffering of bigger pictures may be sometimes tolerated, sometimes addressed to a degree by a generation or by a wing of the guild across several generations. It is somewhat ironic to me that those few who do address broader issues and questions in forms of biblical theologies are held in disdain for their theological conservatism by the minimalist exegetes and scientific historians. But the truly amazing thing is that few bigger pictures or proposals seem to infect the basic conservative structure and conceptualization of the most respected doctoral programs in biblical studies. The programs—as opposed to the work of some individuals and some small working groups—seem almost totally immune to such efforts. If there were not so much evidence for the low level of critical consciousness among scholars about such matters, one might be led to wonder whether there were not some sort of collusion in the guild to delegitimize concern about broader issues.

Given the guild's basic preoccupation with the aesthetics of biblical literatures and/or their trustworthiness as sources for

histories, and given its refusal to encourage pursuit of the larger religious- and cultural-critical issues, the guild of biblical scholars can be argued to represent an obfuscating conservative agenda that may not have the intent but certainly has the effect of further legitimizing establishment culture by protecting for its purposes a certain character of religious tradition and orientation. Such self-definition and function are poignantly and ironically not unlike one aspect of the agenda embraced and pursued in several strands of biblical tradition itself.

Construed as the “classics” of religious and theological studies, such that its position within larger theological and some religious studies curricula is foundational and privileged, biblical studies remains uncritical and unproblematized. As such, it is not open to postcolonial and postmodern questions about the cultural and political functions and effects of the Bible in American and other cultures in the modern world, as well as the multicultural phenomenon of scripturalizing in general. This more conservative orientation and self-definition reflects the guild’s position vis-à-vis the center of the dominant cultural order. What else can the guild-sanctioned agenda for biblical scholars—making translucent biblical literatures and reconstructing biblical histories for politically dominant churches and society—signify but the assumptions that contemporary (U.S.) culture and society are somehow historical representations and ideological extensions of ancient biblical culture, requiring only degrees of mediation, or, conversely, that the chasm between the Bible and the present is so wide and unnegotiable that the status quo might as well obtain? The agenda that defines the work of the biblical scholar primarily in terms of attention to the literary, historical, and other details assumes that a problematizing of the Bible in the culture is either unnecessary or unfeasible. But only a culture that assumes that it is the representation and ideological legatee of the Bible could wade into the details as though the only challenge were the establishment of the correct text or the discovery of the correct methods by which the correct interpretation of the text could be discerned and promulgated. The larger picture and the larger issue having to do with the continuing modern cultural and political functions and effects of the Bible in the culture are not engaged because these matters are assumed to be part of membership within the dominant culture.¹¹

It is this uncritical preoccupation with the details of the Bible without attention to the big cultural-political picture that it represents and has helped create, all in the interest of providing legitimate ideological and religious cover for the dominant status quo, that makes biblical studies problematic for me. My identification as outsider, as member of a postcolonial, diasporic community, means that I can hardly make the assumptions that the dominant American culture makes about the nexus between the Bible and American culture, specifically, about the role of the Bible in the formation and legitimation of dominant American culture.

But what does this mean for those who were defined as “other” and marginal—especially the racial “other”—in Europe and America? As survival to marginals in colonial contexts has meant taking an ideologically critical and resistant stance toward the dominant society and culture, so the Bible, insofar as it has been embraced and pressed into ideological service by the dominant society and culture, must be problematized. It has been viewed as a whole statement that is facilitating either of liberation or of the other than liberating status quo.

Following Long, it is clear that any serious thinking about African Americans and their culture and world-views and about the African presence in the New World can hardly be thought of without a consideration of religion.¹² Because of what America has come to mean and how America was ideologically, discursively, and politically formed, and because of the cultural openness and adaptability, including religiously “musical” sensibilities on the part of African peoples, any consideration of the religious ways of black folk in America cannot possibly leave out of consideration the Bible in African-American cultural formation.¹³

As both discourses are pressed into service to help clarify matters regarding the character and political effects of religion in America, they are changed in their focus and orientation. Biblical studies should no longer have as its single focus ancient texts or ancient communities; (African-) American studies should have as its interpretive focus the religious element, in particular the Bible, as part of the effort to get beyond focusing merely on great persons and the like, to an effort to chart the history of the popular search for meaning, affirmation, and social power. The project that collapses these two discourses would need to have as its starting point

not the example of a situation or community or personality of the eighth century B.C.E. or the second century C.E., nor the teachings and exhortations of any ancient biblical text. The starting point must be a site within contemporary culture, with special attention to the matter of the particular predilections, world-views, and orientations of such a site as they come into focus through and are informed by biblical interpretation. Such an agenda, which would be my understanding of religious criticism, removes the Bible and biblical interpretation from their privileged foundationalist perch and conservative legitimating functioning in the dominant culture and society evidenced most strikingly in popular religion and culture and in most theological and religious studies curricula.¹⁴

So in its nonfoundationalist position, the Bible would not figure at the beginning or at the end, but in the middle, of the analysis, important only as it helps explain the character of cultural, in this case, American rhetorics, American political, and other orientations. There is to be no effort to understand what any biblical text “means” or “meant” apart from the contemporary cultural interests in it. In the religious criticism here advanced, contemporary cultural interests alone, not the ancient qua the ancient, nor appeals to religious tradition or authority, to general canonical mandates and so forth, provide the impetus for study of the Bible.

So to my biblical studies colleagues I say—echoing only the form and function of the words that reportedly defined and focused Bill Clinton’s first presidential campaign—it’s *religion* (whatever and all that this complex reference entails), *not the text*, that we should focus upon like a laser beam.¹⁵ The text should be understood only as symbol, as mediator of the transcendent.¹⁶

But how might or should we begin our differently understood work of biblical (New Testament) studies and the history of early Christianity that displaces and relativizes the text? *The Bible*—to state again as clearly as possible the thesis that governs this essay—*will be understood first and primarily as a late twentieth-century document or phenomenon, not as an ancient one*. The importance of the views of any particular ancient text or ancient writer is to be established only upon consideration of the engagement of the Bible among contemporaries. Thus, we should begin biblical studies with our contemporary religious situation—analyzed with a view to discerning and critiquing its *textures*, as well as its *textualizations*.

Surely, interpreters will begin at different places, stressing or noting different contemporary issues or problematics; this is appropriate and is to be expected. Each interpreter simply must be clear and honest about why it is that he or she begins at certain points and puts stresses at certain points along the way. I want to state as clearly as I can that *my agenda is to try to understand the puzzle that is the persistence in the United States of a type of religious orientation that can initially and generally be characterized as “otherworldly.”* Because the persistence of such an orientation among African Americans has been much noted, and because African Americans constitute the most intimate world that I know, it seems important to focus attention on them. The volumes and articles and essays devoted to African Americans, including African-American Christianity, have not to date been able to answer my questions about what accounts for the religious orientation of African Americans. I want to know not merely who did certain things, when and under what circumstances certain things happened, but, more important, how and why—how and why displaced, enslaved, marginalized people could come to embrace a certain type of religious vision and religious rhetoric and orientation. What was it about the displaced Africans, what was it about America, and what was it about “Christianity” that accounted for the persistence of a particular vision and representation of “Christianity” in America and among African Americans? These questions require attention, if for no reason other than to come to terms with a still important if not dominant aspect of American culture. But they also help me to understand (in the sense that Charles Long meant it) who and why I am.

Because of the “involuntary presence” of African Americans in the United States, it is impossible to understand the “otherworldly” orientations of African Americans without an understanding of the same orientations of what was the larger and dominant culture. Each world influenced and shaped the orientation of the other.¹⁷ Yet there certainly were early on in United States history differences in the developments between the two worlds—and in time beyond them. It is on account of its role as one of the primary *contemporary* carriers of religious otherworldliness in the United States that the African American history of difference that will be the focus in this essay.

Modern-Day Persistence of Otherworldiness: The American Religion

A persistent and puzzling feature of the still dominant European-American culture that continues to have enormous cultural and political ramifications and therefore begs explanation and criticism is its history of contempt for, or at least denial of, in much of its rhetoric, an unmediated European past as its major self-definitional point of reference. This is puzzling because it is clear at the same time that the European heritage is also fully embraced in order to establish for internal domestic politics a certain hegemony in particular areas of American cultural life. Yet according to its mythos, the United States is different, even unique: in the escape from what was perceived as the oppression, contradictions, and limitations of the Old World that was Europe, and preferring to see what is now considered part of North America as “new” and “virginal,” that is, a world existing without a natural, temporal history, without peoples or without peoples rich in complexities and tradition, many of those Europeans who escaped or otherwise left their homeland and “discovered” the land that is now America wanted to start over in almost every conceivable sense of the term. The intention was somewhat naive: the Europeans in the New World reinscribed and ratified Old-World traditions and merely translated them into New-World situations.

Yet curiously consistent with the aims of many to constitute a new world, there is discernible throughout the history of the new Americans a curious rhetorical and ideological turning away from the past associated with Europe. America could not be “America”—unique, God’s experiment, the world’s peacekeeper, patrolman, “Captain America,” humankind’s last chance, and so the mythos goes—without renouncing or denying a significant part of the past. So any attempt to understand America and any social-cultural minority formations within it, must, it seems to me, fathom the complex development behind the embracing of and contempt for the Old World as the basis of the formation of the American self and orientation in the world. Here it is obvious that religion has figured rather prominently.

The role of religion in the dramatic formation of the American self has always been stressed in interpretations of the larger society.

But a recent interpretive analysis by literary critic Harold Bloom has done more to provoke my thinking about the nexus between a dominant contemporary American religious self-definition and orientation and the different pasts that have shaped this self-definition and orientation than any other I can name. Bloom's analysis in his book *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*¹⁸ provides for me a provocative springboard for an analysis of the American socioreligious situation that at the same time helps account for African-American religious ways and traditions in a manner that goes beyond the still usual additive or exotic primitive approach. To Bloom's arguments I now turn as a way to help the reader understand what has motivated my (re)turn to the past that is biblical, specifically Christian, antiquity.

Bloom also defines his work as "religious criticism," involving the characterization and critique of expressions of the religious in American culture. In *The American Religion* Bloom delves into what he understands to be an important defining aspect of the American religious psyche through a study of the past—the past that has aspects of Greco-Roman antiquity. In an effort to account for the origins and orientation of the dominant strand of "American religion," Bloom turns to some of the transcendental visions, impulses, and movements of Greco-Roman antiquity—Christianity, Judaism, and Gnosticism. Bloom argues with a boldness that only an outsider to the field of religious and theological studies could bring to the issues that the dominant strand of contemporary "American religion"—otherworldly and radically individualistic, conservative, and mostly, although not limited to, the circles of fundamentalist Christians—is ideological heir to the Gnosticism of late antiquity. As always, Bloom articulates his position with a panache that in a few passages I find hard to resist:

Religion, in the ostensibly Protestant United States, is something subtly other than Christianity we are post-Protestant, and we live in a persuasive redefinition of Christianity A blend of ancient heresies and nineteenth century stresses . . . , the American Religion moves towards the twenty-first century with an unrestrained triumphalism, easily convertible into our political vagaries
And the American Religion, for its two centuries of existence,

seems . . . to be irretrievably Gnostic. It is a knowing, by and of an uncreated self, or self-within-the-self, and the knowledge leads to freedom, a dangerous and doom-eager freedom: from nature, time, history, community, other selves.¹⁹

This is a fascinating intellectual argument for a number of reasons. As a model of a type of religious criticism it provides opportunity for the scholar of religion, especially the historian of religion, to reframe normally narrowly focused technical and antiquarian work into reflection on modern and contemporary issues. But the most serious challenge has to do not merely with what is the matter of relevance, or with what is or is not interesting; it has to do with that old assumption on the part of the historian that the past—in this case late antiquity in general, the New Testament and early Christianity in particular—is important in its own right just because it is the past. Such a view is naive and can no longer be defended. Every inquiry into the past is a quest to understand the present, a statement about the values and prejudices and orientations of a part of the present, certainly, including the inquirer's present. Bloom's provocative arguments make clear that a part of the American present is preoccupied with a part of the legacy of antiquity (biblical and therefore also Jewish, Greek, and Roman) as part of an effort to explain, if not justify, certain contemporary American visions of, and orientations to, the world. Thus, his arguments, whatever their merit on substance, suggest the importance of a different orientation for historical study, in biblical studies and in the history of religions in general.

So I must stress again that it is now rather difficult for me as an historian of Christian origins to begin historical inquiry at any point other than in my present. So in scholarly form and in substance, Bloom's work very much resonates with me. There are few other issues of greater fascination, of heuristic significance and puzzlement for scholarship (especially in the history of religions of Greco-Roman antiquity), and for global sociopolitical dynamics, than that of the *fin de siècle* resurgence of the attitudes and behaviors described by Bloom.

Yet the most important reason that Bloom must be answered is that on the matter of substance of argument, he is, if not wrong, at least not provocative or radical enough. The dominant strand of

American religion, albeit conservative, otherworldly, fundamentalist, and obsessively individualistic, need not be argued or assumed to have its origins in, or even to be in fundamental solidarity with, the Gnosticism and/or gnosis of late antiquity. This is so not only because so much has happened between the two worlds to make any causal argument anything other than problematic, but also because most contemporary conservatives and fundamentalists in the United States, their ancient Christian rhetoric notwithstanding, are not otherworldly or antiworldly enough; they do not share that comprehensive world-view so fundamental to many early Christians and self-styled Gnostics and others in late antiquity. They do not share that “world”—complex, comprehensive, and radical in its “outworldly”²⁰ stance—that is associated with several groups and movements of late antiquity, including early Christianities and, of course, Gnosticism. This difference is important not for the sake of the historian making points at the expense of a literary critic; it is important because although Bloom may be correct in arguing that the contemporary dominant strand of religion in the “religion-soaked,” “religion-mad” United States is the type that is obsessed by radical freedom and solitude, it is not at all clear that this modern American-defined freedom and solitude should be identified with, or be seen as derivative of, ancient Gnostics and/or gnosis.

At any rate, the matter clearly warrants further examination. But to argue as Bloom does is to fall into the trap of forcing historical connections of origins and influence and of finding similarity of worldview on the basis of shared concepts, ideas, and language.²¹ It is far better to attempt to account for the “American religion” within the more comprehensive framework of the history of world-view or mentalité.²²

— *Contemptus mundi* (contempt for the world) is an expression that captures rather poignantly the complex of attitudes, behaviors, and rhetorics of a part of many different cultures of Greco-Roman antiquity and beyond. An examination of some of the late ancient evidence and of some of the methodological issues involved will afford me the opportunity to engage an aspect of the issues raised by Bloom and may provide a different perspective on African American culture.

***Contemptus Mundi* As Matrix for the American Religion**

The expression *contemptus mundi* is a representation both for a recognized historical literary expression—more broadly, a rhetorics or discourse—and a world-view. As a literary expression and by extension rhetorics or discourse, it is most notably associated with a certain type of literature that proliferated in the late Middle Ages, especially during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but then shortly thereafter disappeared.²³

As world-view and social orientation, *contemptus mundi* is ancient in origins, dating back to the philosophers and visionaries of the worlds of the Far East and the eastern Mediterranean. Found among many new, interstitial social formations or networks, including the complex of movements that have come to be known as early Judaism and Christianity, it has continued throughout a great span of history to evoke a range of different aesthetic, sociopolitical, and religious responses.²⁴ Initially appearing and developing “between the cracks” of traditional formations in holistic societies, these formations became reifications of transcendental visions.²⁵ The philosophers, prophets, sages, seers, and wisdom teachers of the “little societies” stretching from China, India, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Arabia and all around the eastern and western Mediterranean from roughly 800 B.C.E. to 700 C.E. (corresponding to K. Jaspers’s “Axial Age”) came to define themselves as carriers of transcendental visions and impulses over against “the world.” The latter came to be conceptualized and problematized as the realm of relations, mores, traditions, and orientations in tension with the new visions or ideals, the newly discovered “world above,” or “world to come,” the realm of ideas, and so forth. The rhetorics of the visionaries, to be sure, reflected great differences in cultures, social stations, and psychic states. But it was always oppositional and often hyperbolic, suggesting the problematizing of the world as a fundamental or baseline issue.

The historiography of early Christian representations and politics of what is here termed *contemptus mundi* has tended to explain it away or apologize for it. This has been due to a rather narrow and negative view of otherworldliness with the assumptions that the sociopolitical ramifications of it are always either slight or negative and that early Christianity developed inexorably and naturally from a world-rejecting to world-embracing ethos.²⁶

But a rather different view is defensible. Ancient Christianity up to Augustine can be understood as a complex of historical rhetorical and social formations governed not by the inevitable turn toward accommodation to the world but by the problematizing of the world, often discussed in theological circles in terms of theodicy or the problem of evil. What I am urging here is a different understanding of the dominant perspective among the earliest Christians. The challenge here is to interpret the literary legacy and rhetorics of early Christianity in such a way that the world-view that inspired the continuing problematizing of the world can be surfaced and understood.

The different conflicting orientations and the debates reflected in extant ancient Christian literary sources can be understood in light of the world-view that is *contemptus mundi*. But such a history of ancient Christian *contemptus mundi* requires reconsideration of old interpretive assumptions and schemata: it will no longer do to assume, as does consensus scholarship, that ancient Christianity is the dramatic history of the process of “catholicization,” “bourgeoisification,” or “world-accommodation.” An historical-rhetorical reading of the relevant sources suggests that *contemptus mundi* remained a fundamental assumption and ideological touchstone throughout the period of ancient Christianity in spite of internal differences and external opposition and disgust. How to come to speak about it, how on the one hand, to justify it, to radicalize it in defensive response, how on the other hand, to explain it away, to temper and domesticate it in response to heightened sensitivities about outsiders’ reviews—these would be matters of much debate, thus, impetus for rhetorical experimentation and enormous literary productivity.²⁷

The manifestations of ancient Christian *contemptus mundi* were numerous and diverse enough that a history and taxonomy of early Christian renunciations and of renunciations in the ancient world have been thought possible.²⁸ We are still without an interpretive history of early Christianity that attempts to account for its different “responses to the world” as reflected through the different types and nuances of its rhetorics and discourses.

James M. Robinson’s schema for the major early Christian understandings of “world” set forth in a 1968 essay is a useful beginning that points to some of the significant general methodological and theoretical challenges.²⁹ His argument about the need to “trace

understandings of world as they come into language” pinpoints one of the major specific methodological challenges to be faced in the effort to account for the complex development that was early Christianity, an analysis of its rhetorics, especially its rhetorics of renunciation. A fathoming of such rhetorics is likely to help greatly in clarifying the whole range of dynamics in early Christianity. Robinson’s call for attention to the manner in which the language among the early Christians reflects the different “understandings of existence” among them was justified. But he would no doubt be quick to admit now that he did not develop or adopt a conceptual model of language and discourse strategy such that the analysis of early Christian rhetorics and discourses in early Christian texts would make sense in terms of the larger world of language theory and play or of rhetorical and social formation.

Thus, yet another beginning effort to sort through some of the understandings of the world within early Christianity with a sensitivity to the *longue dureé* and to comparative religions is in order. Only a summary sketch of a few snapshots that are nonetheless loaded with complex interactions and issues can be supplied here.

Against the radical renunciations of a minority (the pneumatic elites) in Corinth, Paul’s famous and haunting *hos me* (as if not) exhortations, framed by the two “otherworldly” eschatological pronouncements—“the time is short [*ho kairos sunestalmenos estin*]... the form of this world is passing away [*paragei gar to schema tou kosmou toutou*]” (1 Cor. 7:29a, 31b)—may actually represent a more worldly “world.” Despite the sharp differences in evidence throughout the chapter, it can be argued that all parties in the debate presume that Christian existence entails, even requires, some sort of renunciation of the world. The real challenge, then, becomes that of identifying, sorting out, and accounting for the different types of renunciations and why certain parties argue for certain types.³⁰

The Johannine community, defining itself with the rhetorically dualistic, absolutist, and mantralike “not . . . of this world” nevertheless was the matrix of a history of quarrels between factions representing a range of views regarding engagement of the world. From the docetic disgust with association with the physical to the physically graphic imagings and remembrances of Jesus, this loosely defined community represented one of the most robust debates about Christian identity and orientation to the world in antiquity. In spite

of what appears to have been fairly universal group acceptance of a language of world enmity and world renunciation, the politics of world renunciation remained rather slippery.³¹

The so-called worldly-defensive, conservative-bourgeois authors of the Pastoral Letters present an interesting hermeneutical challenge. Although their polemics seem to reflect the sensibilities and orientations of acceptance of the world and acceptance by the world, a second look is warranted. The evidence of the Pastorals themselves and corroborating evidence of near-contemporary texts from the same region suggest instead that the authors of the Pastorals and the few individuals who were in solidarity with them hardly gained acceptance by the contemporary world-embracing and established citizens in second-century urban Asia Minor. I think they protested too much; they were very defensive and thereby betrayed all too clearly their own “outworldly” sensibilities and the perception of others that they were such. To be sure, the women who had renounced the traditional domestic roles expected of them, including sexual relations and family life, were a great shock to all. But the authors of the Pastorals seemed not to be aware of just how consonant was their general religious worldview, including, for example, the teaching that the end of the world was near, with the responses on the part of the ascetic women and men. In other words, the theology espoused by the authors of the Pastorals was itself world-renouncing. The debate that developed was not about whether renunciation of the world in general was appropriate, but about which type and what degree of renunciation, in light of prejudices and political power considerations, was appropriate.³²

The communities behind the apocryphal acts and “gnostic” documents—arguably the most radical among the earliest Christians in their expressions of *contemptus mundi*—considered their enemies to be all others, including other believers who had not been initiated into their inner circle and pledged a life of uncompromising solidarity with them and, of course, the same degree of enmity with the world. Yet it is precisely the politics of their radical asceticisms—the exclusion and elitism, the competition, as well as the liberationist and class struggle undertones—that reflect the complexity—namely, the politics and hermeneutics—of their “worldliness.”³³

Finally, one of the most powerful examples of the complexity of early Christian *contemptus mundi* is Augustine. Usually considered

a “worldly” figure by most scholarly interpretive measurements, he can be better understood as advancing *contemptus mundi* in his mature, perhaps most influential work, *The City of God*. Insofar as he encouraged the desacralization and depolitization of the empire, he encouraged *contemptus mundi*—in fact, of every empire or social and political order, whether headed by a Constantine or a Julian!³⁴ For Augustine, *pace* Eusebius, there could be no establishment court theology. The notion of a “Christian” empire was absurd, a contradiction in terms. The Christian must always be a pilgrim and stranger (*peregrinus*), one who models *contemptus mundi*.³⁵

These few examples of *contemptus mundi* raise important questions—questions about the complexity of understandings and expressions of *contemptus mundi*, about the methodological challenges involved in isolating or charting the course of these different expressions, and about the social and political ramifications of such expressions.

Yet the challenge to investigate the rhetorics of renunciation in early Christianity does not go far enough in terms of comparativist and cultural-critical perspectives. By definition, the world-view that is *contemptus mundi* is cross-cultural. Thus, the study of it should be cross-cultural. So even if the focus remains on developments in Christianity, it is important that such focus consistently respect the broader histories of religions and histories of cultural formation and development and draw upon the nuances and variations that such histories will evidence. There are already some exciting advances in this area in the comparative investigation of the origins and worldly political effect of the transcendentalist impulses and visions.³⁶

The pervasive force of *contemptus mundi* within transcendental communities in general and in early Christianity in particular suggests that religion is rhetorical and social formation, viz. attempts to realize within the dynamics and orientations and language of social collectivities particular world-views. This suggests in agreement with Robinson the possibility of a history of religions that would focus on the shifts, the rising and falling of “world”—of world construction and world-orientation. That a basis for a more consistent framework for the comparative study of religion is latent within this scholarly agenda is clear and should be encouraged for this reason alone. But beyond Robinson’s suggestions, I would argue that with *contemptus mundi* an entirely different set of heuristic categories and typologies

suggests itself in the interpretation of all transcendental religions.

The Ascetics of Late Modern Social Formation and the Social Formation of Late Ancient Asceticisms

In *contemptus mundi* is not only a key to a clearer understanding of a quite popular late ancient rhetorics and world-view; it is also a provocative challenge to modern sensibilities. The African negotiation of the New World that has become the United States could be understood as a complex historical and contemporary phenomenon that represents an exemplum of modern world (de)construction. New alternate worlds are psychically and socioculturally experienced and defined, representing at the level of the individual what literary critic Houston Baker and poet-essayist-historian Edward Brathwaite have termed the “self-in-marronage,”³⁷ what at the collective historical level I term “cultural marronage.” From this site of marronage, of flight from as well as resistance to the world that is “hard,” everything is experienced and engaged as an-other world; all those in solidarity are understood to be “bound for the Promised Land.” The dominating world is deconstructed and is held under suspicion and in contempt—renounced. Orientation to “the world” and relations within the marooned communities are viewed in terms of *ascetics*, as offensive and defensive tactics, as the disciplines and arts of the maintenance and politics of sociocultural formation.

So when the African-American story is included, Bloom’s argument about contemporary “religion-soaked,” “religion-mad” United States—obsessed by radical freedom and solitude, identified with, or seen as derivative of, ancient Gnosticism—must be reexamined and nuanced. Far beyond Bloom’s and most social scientific assumptions about social conditions as determinants, the African American story suggests the importance of a “sociology of hope,”³⁸ a more complex reading of the mutuality of influence in the dynamics between social conditions and otherworldly visions and hopes and new social formations. This sociology suggests enormous implications for the study of early Christianities. The latter can be understood as a complex of sociocultural formations, their devotees’ self-understanding

and orientation summed up by the expression *contemptus mundi*. Moreover, the African-American story suggests the importance of a full range of cultural expressiveness among the arts of resistance for the sake of both the mastery and deformation³⁹ of dominant cultural formation.

So the ascetics of a late modern sociocultural formation suggests the sociocultural functions and expressivity of late ancient religious asceticisms. And late ancient religious asceticisms in turn suggest the sociocultural effects and expressivity of late modern religious hope. The historical religiocritical study of both late ancient asceticisms and a late modern sociocultural formation as exempla of cultural marronage thus proves to be productive of the historical tracings and cross-cultural isolation and characterization of a religious orientation. Such a production can claim to be a modest contribution to religious and theological studies at the end of the century.

ENDNOTES

1. My primary guild membership is in biblical studies, but I also have memberships in other fields—early Christianity, history of religions, studies in black religions, literature, among others. Beyond the Society of Biblical Literature, the next most important because most closely related, guild membership is in the North American Patristics Society—the guild of scholars of early Christianity. All that is said about biblical studies holds as much for—in most cases, more than—early church history. I experience the church history guild as even less diverse and more conservative than the guild of biblical scholars.
2. Regarding “methodological atheism,” see Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 100, 180.
3. This term and concept is developed by W. C. Smith in his book *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).
4. See Homi K. Bhabhi, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), passim, for the development of the notion of “site of enunciation” in the formation of culture, especially minority cultures.
5. See Houston A. Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), passim, for the development of the notion of modernism in connection with the making of African America.
6. See Robert T. Hughes, ed., *The Primitive Church in the Modern World* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), and *The American Quest for the Primitive Church* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), regarding the primitivist impulse in American society.
7. See Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 8.
8. This is part of the challenge that W. C. Smith years ago laid before biblical

scholars. Some of his students in comparative religions—including William Graham, Barbara Holdrege, and Miriam Levering—have taken up the challenge in research and writings. (See Miriam A. Levering, ed., *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989].) But as far as I can tell, few biblical scholars, and no graduate program in biblical studies, have taken up the challenge. Beyond the courses I have developed at Claremont and at Union, I am not aware of more than one or two other instances in which biblical scholars offer courses on the Bible in modern culture.

9. The collection of essays commissioned on the history of biblical scholarship in connection with the centennial of the Society of Biblical Literature comes as close to an admission of the importance of addressing the Bible in culture that I know about. But must we await the bicentennial celebration to see a serious interest develop along these lines? See the volumes in the Society of Biblical Literature-sponsored Bible in American Culture series published by Fortress Press and Scholars Press.

10. Its mission statement is most revealing: “. . . to stimulate the critical investigation of biblical literature, together with related literature, by the exchange of scholarly research[and] . . . to support those disciplines and subdisciplines pertinent to the illumination of the literatures and religions of the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean regions, such as the study of ancient languages, textual criticism, history, and archaeology.” Cf. the Society of Biblical Literature statement of self-definition in the latest joint AAR/SBL Annual Meeting Program, as well as most official SBL documents.

11. In this respect biblical studies tends to function and orient itself within the context of theological studies (even religious studies in some places) in much the same way as does classics within the context of humanities curricula in many places—as that field of discourse the importance of which can be taken for granted. Again, I refer the reader to the SBL Bible in American Culture series. Also, for literature on classics in U.S. context see Meyer Reinhold, *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman Heritage in the United States* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984); and *Classical Tradition and the Americas*, ed. W. Haase and Meyer Reinhold (New York: De Gruyter, 1994).

12. But see incredibly, Darlene C. Hine, *The State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1986). There is no hint in the selection of essays or in the orientation of the essays of awareness of the importance of religion in the doing of African-American history!

13. See Martin Marty, *Religion and Republic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987); Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, eds., *Bible in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and V. L. Wimbush, “African Americans and the Bible,” in *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History*, vol. 1, ed. J. Salzman, David Lionel Smith, and Cornel West (Macmillan Reference Volume USA; New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1996).

14. See Edward Farley, *Theologia: Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). This is perhaps the most cited book in reference to the interpretation of the structure and ideology of American “mainline” Protestant theological education. See also the useful collection of essays in *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991); and the interesting arguments of David H. Kelsey in his *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School?* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

15. See Frederick M. Denny and Rodney L. Taylor, eds., *The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985), esp. Sam D. Gill's essay, “Nonliterate Traditions and Holy Books,” with its provocative challenge

for the study of religions.

16. Here again Smith is important and provocative. See his *What Is Scripture?*, 239.
17. See Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth Century Virginia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), for an illuminating reconstruction of shared culture between the races in a particular context that arguably can be extended into many different U.S. contexts.
18. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).
19. *Ibid.*, 45, 49.
20. See Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), chap. 1.
21. See Ioan P. Couliano, *Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism*, trans. H. S. Wiesner and the author (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992), for provocative treatment of the phenomenon; and most recently the equally provocative revisionist treatment of Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling Dubious Categories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
22. See the persuasive arguments of respected historian of religion and practitioner of "worldview analysis" Ninian Smart in his *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983). Also, regarding "mentalities," see Michele Vovelle, *Ideologies and Mentalities*, trans. Eamon O'Flaherty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
23. See extensive and provocative historical treatment by Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of Western Guilt Culture: 13th-18th Centuries* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990); and two classic primary texts in Bernard of Cluny (*Scorn for the World: Bernard of Cluny's De Contemptu Mundi*, ed. Ronald E. Pepin [Medieval Texts and Studies No. 8; East Lansing Mich.: Colleagues Press, 1991]), and Lothario Dei Segni (Pope Innocent III), (*On the Misery of the Human Condition [De miseria humane conditionis]*, ed. Donald R. Howard [Library of Liberal Arts No. 132; New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969]). See further recent illuminating discussion regarding general European backgrounds and ramifications by Ann Ramsey, "Flagellation and the French Counter-Reformation: Asceticism, Social Discipline and the Evolution of a Penitential Culture," in Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism: Proceedings of an International Conference on the Ascetic Dimension in Religious Life and Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1995).
24. See Wimbush and Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism*, for a number of cross-cultural discussions with historical and contemporary foci; and Hans G. Kippenberg, *Die vorderasiatischen Erlösungsreligionen: in ihrem Zusammenhang mit der antiken Stadtherrschaft* (Max-Weber-Vorlesungen, 1988; Suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft 917; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), for discussion regarding ancient Mediterranean cultures.
25. See S. N. Eisenstadt, "Introduction: The Axial Age Breakthroughs—Their Characteristics and Origins," in S. N. Eisenstadt, ed., *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 1-25; and Michael Mann, *Sources of Social Power: A History of Power from the Beginnings to A.D. 1760*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), chap. 1 and 2, for discussion of these concepts.
26. See Robert M. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine: The Rise and Triumph of Christianity in the Roman World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990); and Margaret Y. MacDonald, *The Pauline Churches: A Socio-Historical Study of Institutionalization in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Writings* (SNTS Monograph Series No. 60; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), as examples, respectively, of fairly typical

arguments—although with very different methodological leanings—by a very well-known and respected senior scholar, and a young scholar whose work is commanding respect.

27. See Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, 303-10.

28. See George H. Sabine's *A History of Political Theory*, 3d ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston) as one attempt at such a history.

29. See James M. Robinson, "World' in Modern Theology and in New Testament Theology," in *Soli Deo Gloria*, ed. J. McDowell Richards (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 88.

30. See V. L. Wimbush, *Paul the Worldly Ascetic: Response to the World and Self-Understanding According to 1 Corinthians 7* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), 6-8.

31. See Fernando F. Segovia, *The Farewell of the Word: The Johannine Call to Abide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), esp. chap. 4.

32. See Lucinda A. Brown, "Asceticism and Ideology: The Language of Power in the Pastoral Epistles," in V. L. Wimbush, ed., *Discursive Formations, Ascetic Piety and the Interpretation of Early Christian Literature, Part 1: Semeia 57* (1992): 77-94.

33. See Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983); and Karen Jo Torjesen, "In Praise of Noble Women: Asceticism, Patronage and Honor," in *Discursive Formations*, 41-64.

34. See Hans G. Kippenberg, "The Role of Christianity in the Depolitization of the Roman Empire," in Eisenstadt, ed., *Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*, 261-62.

35. See R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of Saint Augustine*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and *The End of Ancient Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), esp. 1:4.

36. Eisenstadt, ed., *Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*, passim.

37. See Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 92-95, 100, 103, and n. 61, for provocative and suggestive use of the term in a context of discussion re: a history of African-American arts of resistance.

38. This expression is taken from the title of the book entitled *Sociology of Hope* by Henri Desroche, trans. Carol Martin-Sperry (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

39. *Mastery and deformation* are terms used by Houston Baker to describe the strategies in the African-American cultural arts of resistance. See *Modernism*, xviii, 49-51, 56, 67, 75, 92, 99, 103-4, 107.

