M. Scott Peck’s Gnostic Superhighway

Roy Herndon Steinhoff Smith

Recently, I read that M. Scott Peck’s The Road Less Traveled (1978) was still on the New York Times’ best-seller list (Common Boundary, 1989, p. 23). The celebrative tone of this notice and the seeming ubiquity of the book in Christian circles prompts me to write this critique. While a number of ministers and Christians I know are very critical of Peck’s later books, they frequently continue to be highly enthusiastic about The Road Less Traveled. The irony of this seeming map of the narrow spiritual path becoming a persistent best-seller is a good starting point for this discussion.

THE GnostIC PECK

For this book is most decidedly not about the narrow road to Christian salvation. Rather it is one of the latest in a long series of works in what is arguably the dominant Western religion, gnosticism. To quote the New Testament scholars, Perrin and Duling:

Basic to the Gnostic view is the perception that the world is an evil place, and that the only possible means of liberation from it is gnosis as:
Who we are, what we have become;
Where we were, whither we were thrown;
Whither we were hastening, from what we are redeemed;
What birth is, and what rebirth.

Clement of Alexandria, Excerpts from Theodotus 78.2

Gnostic myths show that the evil world was not created by the good God, but by a second, inferior Deity, and that the true self, the divine self seen as a spark of light, is trapped in an alien body with all of its sensual passions. This body-spirit dualism is expressed in another way, that the evil powers attempt to keep the true self in a state of sleep or drunkenness in order to hold the creation of the evil

1Roy Herndon Steinhoff Smith, Ph.D., Phillips Graduate Seminary, P.O. Box 2335, University Station, Enid, OK 73702.
world together. To know the myths—to have gnosis—is to have salvation!

In general, Gnostics believed that gnosis can be taught or that it can be transmitted through a secret ritual, but ultimately it comes from above as a “call,” or by a Gnostic Redeemer who descends from the world of light, disguises himself in human form without becoming bodily, teaches gnosis, and returns or reascends.... However the Gnostic gains his gnosis, he learns that this world and this body are not his true home, that he has been “thrown” into an alien world. Often he totally renounces the body and its passions (asceticism) or, knowing that the world is not his true place and cannot really affect him, he allows himself the utmost freedom (libertinism). Either way, he experiences rebirth and becomes part of the privileged few (pp. 12-13).²

This sort of dualistic gnosticism was the soil out of which sprang movements which became labeled heretical by the early Christian church. The major gnostic heresy was docetism, the belief that Christ only seemed to have a body actually but was pure spirit. But gnosticism also was the basis of Marcionism, in which most of what became the Christian Bible was declared to be the word of a false god, and was related to other dualistic movements in which good, spiritual, and male forces battled evil, material, and female forces. Paul’s letters to the Corinthians were written to combat the influence of gnosticism, which had led certain members of the Corinthian church to believe that they were more spiritually advanced or perfect than others. Some of these “strong” Christians tended toward libertinism. Because they had been freed from sin, the rule of matter and the passions, they felt they were morally free to do anything. Apparently they enacted their belief in their absolute freedom by having orgies with the notoriously promiscuous “women of Corinth” (Perrin and Duling, pp. 176-182, 362, 440-441).

Modern gnosticism takes just as many forms. Those fundamentalists who identify Jesus’s suffering with his fallen human nature as opposed to his godlike nature are engaging in a docetic denial of the incarnation. Those who continue to identify sexual relationships as somehow unholy and unspiritual are engaging in gnostic dualism, as are those who explicitly or implicitly define women as less holy than men. The exaltation of abstract and often esoteric theology over Christian experience and practice often involves a gnostic devotion to humanly achievable knowledge as the means to salvation.

The most common forms of modern gnosticism are the popular psychologies and spiritualities which claim that the possession of certain kinds

²I accept the claim of Aloyious Pieris and others that the “gnostic” element of Christianity—the focus on a disciplined search for sacred wisdom—is essential to it. The “gnosticism” defined by Perrin and Dulling makes this search for wisdom the sole means to God; it denies grace as I understand it; salvation is an achievement of an elite. It is this elevation of gnosticism to the religion, the idolatry of wisdom, which, I argue, characterizes Scott Peck’s work.