

## THEORY, EXPERIENCE AND “THE AMERICAN RELIGION”

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Today, as everyone knows, it is theory that counts in the American university, especially in the humanities departments. Post-structuralist, deconstructionist, neo-Marxist and new historicist theories have reshaped the study of literature, history, art and law. In these circumstances it is possible that the academic study of religion will be similarly reshaped.

The area of religious studies that may feel the strongest influence from currently fashionable theories is the study of religious experience—as distinguished, for example, from the study of theology or Church history. All currently fashionable academic theories harbor a deep skepticism about the mind’s capacity for arriving at objective truth, whether that be the truth of history, the truth of God, or any other truth. The domain that is most amenable to current theory is the domain of assumption, opinion, subjectivity, the domain of belief with no necessary connection to truth—in a word, the domain of experience.

Yet this may also be the domain in which current theory most clearly exposes its limitations. The study of religious experience presents the difficult problem of determining what can be identified as true about experience when experience is regarded from the perspective of theories deeply inscribed with skepticism about all truth-claims. Such skepticism naturally raises the question of anyone’s ability to know and report even the truth of his own experience.

If in fact there is a dominant theme in the academy’s current romance with theory it is the assumption that what people think they believe, have faith in, quarrel about, even die for, is not what they actually experience. It is the assumption that the experience that individuals think they have is merely a mask by which deeper and wider forces—political, ideological, psychological, “textual”—simultaneously hide and express themselves. This is the ironic or paradoxical worldview that inspires the hundreds of radically new interpretations of seemingly commonplace (but hitherto “misread”) experience that issue annually from the academic press.

But when skeptical theory is invoked in the study of religious experience, the effect is paradoxical or ironic in another way. When theory’s concern with religious “experience” excludes a concern with the truth-claims embedded in this “experience,” the result is a denaturing of experience itself—not

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to mention a denaturing of religion. This is the kind of result that calls into question the plausibility and usefulness of any such theory.

My argument requires an example, and Harold Bloom, a distinguished academic theorist, has helpfully provided one.<sup>1</sup> Bloom's study is especially helpful because it attempts to avoid the type of theory—of which there is already plenty available—that reduces religious experience to nonreligious categories. Bloom intends to write “religious criticism,” not thinly disguised psychological or political theory. His work is animated, however, by the ubiquitous assumption of current high academic theory, the assumption that the nature of individual experience is ordinarily hidden from itself.

By applying his assumption Bloom uncovers, as he believes, an unperceived reality beneath the facade of American religious belief. He discovers that America's major religion is not Christianity at all. It is a gnostic religion that masks itself in the forms of Christianity. Although Bloom's examples of gnosticism come almost exclusively from people who believe they are Protestants, he stipulates that Americans of every ostensible creed have embraced the gnostic faith without suspecting that they have done so. One need not believe that one is a gnostic in order to be a gnostic.

But what does Bloom mean by gnosticism? The ancient gnostics devoted themselves to a secret knowledge (*gnōsis*) that often amounted to little more than a secret confidence in their own significance as knowers. This, according to Bloom, is the confidence that Americans are nurturing—have been nurturing, in fact, during the last two centuries.

The American religion, Bloom argues, is a “religion of the self” that “seeks to know its own inwardness, in isolation.”<sup>2</sup> Like ancient gnosticism the American religion exists in chronic rebellion against the world outside the self, the world of nature and history. “American gnosticism escapes from time.” Its “knowing ultimately tells you that you are beyond nature,” just as the resurrected Jesus was. The American gnostic “walks alone with Jesus in a perpetually expanded interval founded upon the forty days' sojourn of the risen Son of Man.”<sup>3</sup> American “Christianity” is an attempt to cheat death, not by the promise of salvation from sin but by the assurance that the self was never captive to sin in the first place. The self can never suffer death because the self has never really been born. Indeed American “Christianity” is not so much a worship of Christ as a worship of the self, which American gnostics imagine “is as old as God is, and so is no part of God's creation.”<sup>4</sup>

Bloom well knows that religious reveries of this kind have practically nothing to do with the doctrines preached by the Methodist or Baptist church next door. But that knowledge merely supports his belief that the American religion is an “experiential faith, largely divorced from doctrine.”<sup>5</sup> The nature of such “experiential” faith has hitherto remained hidden, conceptually unidentified by the great majority of people who have

<sup>1</sup> H. Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 37.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 40, 265.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 49.

supposedly experienced it. The irony, as Bloom puts it, is that the American religion is a "*knowing* [that] does not know itself."<sup>6</sup> It is a faith that could seemingly be brought to light only by the academic theory of the present moment. Bloom insists that the ostensible beliefs, the doctrines that American churches have spent centuries arguing about, are mere masks for the self-worshipping deities who occupy the pews.

Almost any theory, no matter how bizarre, can find some support in fact, and Bloom's ideas about a pervasive though hitherto unconceptualized American gnosticism are actually supported by more evidence than academic theories usually have to show. If Americans really are devoted to a gnostic faith in the deified self (however masked that self may be), one would expect to find many of them indulging in unorthodox religious improvisation. One would expect individual believers, each of them wandering off on his or her own solitary walk with Jesus, to arrive at some exotic locations. And that is what has happened. The exuberant individualism of such denominations and groups as the Mormons, Christian Scientists, Spiritualists, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Worldwide Church of God (formerly the Radio Church of God) has lined America's boulevards with tabernacles and summoned a cloud of proselytizing witnesses to American doorsteps. Bloom's theory enables him to appreciate the importance of what might be called America's vernacular religions—faiths that were devised in this country, mostly by untrained and sometimes by isolated craftsmen, faiths that carry the irregular but indelible marks of individual American experience.

Still at issue, however, is what America's religious inventions have to tell us about the character of "the American religion" and in particular about the relationship between American individualism and American Christianity. Is it really plausible to suggest, as Bloom's theory does, that the inevitable product of American individualism is a creedless, antihistorical habit of pure self-worship?

I believe that question can best be answered by reference to the mainstream of traditional American Christianity rather than by reference to the vernacular religions from which Bloom derives most of his examples of American Christian experience. The vernacular religions are characteristic of America, but that does not mean that they (or any one of them, since they differ from one another as much as they differ from the mainstream) are fully representative of America. But before turning to mainstream experience, let us consider how well Bloom's theory deals with a religious figure whose work Bloom considers in several ways typical of the gnostic American religion: Joseph Franklin Rutherford, the shaping spirit of Jehovah's Witnesses, and an American individualist if ever there was one.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 263.

<sup>7</sup> For information on Rutherford and his movement I am indebted to M. J. Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed: The Story of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1985); R. Franz, *Crisis of Conscience* (Atlanta: Commentary, 1983); anon., *Jehovah's Witnesses in the Divine Purpose* (Brooklyn: Watch Tower, 1959); J. Rutherford, *Riches* (Brooklyn: Watch Tower, 1936); *Children* (Brooklyn: Watch Tower, 1941); T. H. Baumann, *Kensington-Talmadge: 1910-1985* (San Diego, 1984); recent volumes of the Watch Tower Society's annual *Yearbook*; and

Rutherford (1869–1942) was a farmer's son who became a lawyer. As a young man he served occasionally as a temporary judge in his native state of Missouri. In middle age he ran afoul of the law and was jailed on a charge of sedition resulting from his religious opposition to World War I. The charge was eventually dropped, and for the rest of his life Rutherford was known to everyone as "the judge." He looked exactly like a judge, and he fulfilled the role of a judge in the OT sense for his hundred thousand followers. Rutherford believed that God planned to destroy the United States government and all other governments and to usher in a paradise in which his (Judge Rutherford's) disciples would live forever in perfect happiness.

Rutherford took the same severe attitude toward religion that he did toward politics. To announce his skepticism about the merits of rival churches he sent his disciples marching through the streets with placards reading: "Religion Is a Snare and a Racket." To announce his confidence in his own prophecies of an imminent millennial dawn he deeded his hundred-acre estate in San Diego, California, to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and other OT figures, whom he expected shortly to be resurrected and to make his house the headquarters from which they would govern the earth. He called the estate Beth Sarim, the House of Princes: "Instead of thy fathers shall be thy children, whom thou mayest make princes in all the earth" (Ps 45:16).

In 1918 Rutherford invented the most American of all advertising slogans: "Millions Now Living Will Never Die"—an unsurpassably self-confident invitation to that final degree of happiness, individual and general, that is commonly associated with the American dream. But when with unintended irony Rutherford himself died, the organization that he had headed and named and for whose theology he was largely responsible—Jehovah's Witnesses—continued without him.<sup>8</sup> One hundred thousand active Witnesses have increased to four million worldwide, one million in the United States alone. The Witnesses are a significant feature of the American religious landscape.

Rutherford has managed to escape the attention of cultural historians and theorists, who know nothing—and, up until now, have cared nothing—about his various roles as prophet, rebel, Coughlinesque radio preacher, and posthumous source of religious identification for growing millions of people. Only Bloom has been perceptive enough to see in Rutherford a figure of some importance and interest. Unfortunately Bloom's analysis of Rutherford and his movement is concerned more with theory than with facts, small or large.

Bloom gets the date of Rutherford's death wrong. He cannot quite get the Witnesses' theology right. He even lets the Witnesses outwrestle him

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interviews with R. Franz, former member of the Society's Governing Body and nephew of F. Franz, current president of the Society.

<sup>8</sup> Rutherford had inherited leadership of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, the corporate body that guides Jehovah's Witnesses, from the more genteelly eccentric Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), a one-time businessman from Pittsburgh who reveled in the mathematics of Bible prophecy. Rutherford revamped the theology of the Watch Tower movement, continuously modified its historical vision, and named its adherents Jehovah's Witnesses.

in a contest over Bible chronology (he laughs at their failure to add 455 BC to 36 AD and come up with 481 years).<sup>9</sup> Much more importantly, he misses the significance of the central irony in the Witnesses' story: the fact that a religion shaped by aggressive individualism is focused not on a transcendently individual experience but on an institutional interpretation of experience—and an institutional interpretation of historical experience at that. The doctrine of Jehovah's Witnesses, the creed to which every adherent must agree completely, is overwhelmingly concerned with the historical applications of Bible prophecy, and especially with the applications of Bible prophecy to the history of the Witness organization itself.

The worship program of Jehovah's Witnesses consists mainly of the preaching and hearing of this version of religious history. The program does not respond in any way to local or individual conditions, desires, or feelings. It is always and everywhere the same. The Witnesses are a worldwide community that does not sing a song, hear a sermon, or read a paragraph of religious literature that their denominational command center in Brooklyn, New York, has not already appointed for singing, hearing, or reading.

If Jehovah's Witnesses are undoctinal, unhistorical, anti-institutional gnostics, then they are certainly well masked. Their behavior seems to have no plausible relationship to gnostic individualism, although it seems to have a rather close relationship to the reports they make about their own belief in a God who works through history and a tightly controlled religious organization. Which account of experience should be credited as true: the Witnesses' claims about their experience, or Bloom's interpretation of their experience as important evidence for the existence of a gnostic "American religion"? Bloom insists that the Witnesses are one of the "indelible strands of the American Religion." He claims that they have "democratized Gnosticism."<sup>10</sup> If this is true, then the Witnesses' experience of themselves amounts to nothing.

But even Bloom seems faintly troubled by his characterization of the Witnesses. The Witnesses cultivate a radical humility before "the great Theocrat." They therefore seem intent on worshiping God, not themselves. They cultivate a "primary rancor . . . against the State, the Church, the Marketplace, [and] the University [!]." They therefore seem somewhat less than devoutly American.<sup>11</sup> Bloom apparently wonders if the experience of the Witnesses may actually contradict his generalizations about American religious experience. But why should one admit to contradictions when one can transform them into instructive moments in a grand dialectic? Bloom blandly suggests that the gnosticism of the Witnesses is also something very nearly the opposite of gnosticism but that both things necessarily belong within the same theory: "Every national faith is bound to call forth its antitype, and ours has produced its antithesis in the peculiarly stark phenomenon of the Jehovah's Witnesses."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Bloom, *American* 165.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 31, 258.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 163, 167.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 159.

It is a revealing passage, although it sheds no new light on religion. Why, one wonders, should every national faith call forth its antitype? But the passage does clearly illustrate the function of that dialectical shifting from thesis to antithesis that has become a normal feature of academic experiments in unmasking. If one's thesis about the supposedly concealed experience of religion, language, culture, or power appears to be starving for lack of sufficient evidence, one can try to keep it alive by forcing it to swallow its antithesis. If the history of particular religious movements turns out to be more complicated than one's theory about religion, one can simply observe that (for some reason) the kind of religion one has in mind is bound to generate an antireligion.

The theories that are most in danger of starving are usually those that are too fat to begin with. Bloom's thesis is a good example. It requires him to find in virtually every kind of American religious experience the radical individualism of Emerson in the Divinity School Address: "Through me, God acts; through me, speaks."<sup>13</sup> This is a thesis about religious individualism that will be placed in jeopardy by almost any specific investigation of reported religious experience—experience that includes individual responses not just to "God" acting through "me" but to religious doctrines and religious institutions. Evidence that conflicts with the thesis can, however, be used as a paradoxically confirming antithesis—an ostensibly Christian mask that supposedly testifies to the existence of an underlying gnostic face.

The dialectical or paradoxical treatment of masks doubtless descends from Marx and Freud, but it has now been made available for use on every academic occasion, with no need for any particular justification, and by everybody—even Bloom, who takes time from his discussions of religion to make disparaging remarks about Freudians and Marxists. This is very much in the postmodern manner, which allows interpretive methods to wander where they will, in the company of Jesus or of any other intellectual leader, masked or unmasked, in search of something that the methods themselves deny could ever constitute plain truth. Bloom is not so hardbitten a postmodernist as many other contemporary theorists, but he speaks in trendy fashion about such things as the "cosmological emptiness that stretches between the unattainable poles of meaning and of truth."<sup>14</sup> His emphasis, like that of virtually all theorists now active in the humanities, is on the idea that every belief is merely an interpretation. The problem of truth need not detain us.

But by emphasizing the role that interpretation plays in belief, Bloom drops a clue that can lead to assumptions that are different from his own, assumptions that may be more useful for future work on "the American religion." One can assume, for instance, that every interpretation is an interpretation of something, a response to something. Religious individualism measures itself, then, in response to a perceived reality. It expands

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 21.

and contracts, not in emptiness but in relationship to facts and perceived truths of many kinds, especially facts and truths of history. The fact that millions now living have actually died, despite one's predictions, is bound to impinge on the experience of even the most radical gnostic—even Judge Rutherford, who had to keep inventing complicated explanations for why the millennium persistently declined to arrive when he predicted it, and who had to construct a cultlike hierarchical institution, an ideologically climate-controlled House of Princes, to shelter his imaginative inventions from too much contact with a disconfirming external world, a world he saw as real and significant indeed.

What surrounds and threatens, or surrounds and succors, the American religion is not a cosmological emptiness but a perceived truth of history. And it is a concern for such truth that gives life to American religious individualism. Without that concern individualism would itself be nearly empty—a subject without an object, a will to believe with nothing to believe in. Without the concern for historical truth, even American atheism would lose its characteristic punch. The classic American atheist, like the religious believer, struggles to tell the truth about history, not merely to announce that one self-generated notion about being-and-nothingness tastes better than another notion. Gnostic individualism would not constitute individual experience in any significant sense of the term. It would be the experience of a company of actors, each equipped with special talents and a beautiful mask and all of them quite incapable of finding a play to interpret.

Bloom, who emphasizes American Christianity's "inwardness," roundly declares that Freud was wrong in saying that Christianity was a delusion because, as Freud thought, there is insufficient evidence for its historical claims. "If you term the Resurrection an illusion or a delusion," Bloom asks, "what have you accomplished against Christianity?"<sup>15</sup> Try asking this of a Jehovah's Witness. Or (to get to an issue of greater importance) try asking it of anyone who holds traditional Christian beliefs. You will be told that the history of Jesus is inseparable from the believer's history of faith.

J. Gresham Machen, a great American proponent of historic Christianity, was clearly on Freud's side when he noted:

The problem of the origin of Christianity is . . . an important practical problem. Rightly or wrongly, Christian experience has ordinarily been connected with one particular view of the origin of the Christian movement; where that view has been abandoned, the experience has ceased.<sup>16</sup>

The American churches that are most successful in maintaining or increasing their membership tend to be those that give serious and steady weight to the NT's historical claims. Churches faced with declining memberships tend to be those that deemphasize such claims or treat them as

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>16</sup> J. G. Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947 [1925]) 3.

metaphor. And the reason is rather plain: An accepted historical claim, unlike a series of metaphors continually reinvented before one's eyes, provides believers with a determinate basis for their interpretive experience. An accepted historical claim provides them with a role in a great drama that must, to be sure, be interpreted but that retains its meaning and significance because it is not merely the product of the actors' own brief improvisations.

In discussing Judge Rutherford, I was seconding Bloom's interest in the apocalyptic margin of the American religion—a large and important margin, but not one sufficient on its own to define the American history of faith. Now I want to sample religious experience closer to the historic center, which tends also to be the popular center. For this purpose I will introduce another person who has so far escaped the attention of the academic theorists (this time including Bloom). I have chosen a woman who is perhaps the most popular writer ever produced by evangelical America: Frances Jane (Fanny) Crosby (1820–1915).

Most American Christians have never heard of Fanny Crosby, but almost all of them have heard her works. Crosby wrote "Blessed Assurance." She wrote "To God Be the Glory," "I Am Thine, O Lord," and "Tell Me the Story of Jesus." She wrote a great many other hymns. She published about two thousand of them with one firm alone.<sup>17</sup> Her work provided nineteenth-century America with a staple emotional experience. Every Sunday throughout America her work continues to provide it. So popular yet so individual was Fanny Crosby that she is hard to improve upon as a symbol of "the American religion."

Born in poverty in a farming community in the state of New York, Fanny was an infant when her sight was destroyed by a wandering "doctor" who applied hot poultices to her eyes. After this disaster she was cared for by her kindly grandmother, who would rock Fanny on her knee and recount to her the daily history "of the beautiful sun with its sunrise and sunset."<sup>18</sup> In 1835 Fanny was admitted to the innovative New York Institution for the Blind, where she became an example of the ability of blind people to acquire and use an education. She composed poetry and recited it in public. She is said to have been the first woman to speak in the halls of Congress. But it was her hymns that gave her real celebrity. Even in her old age, "a withered old crone . . . ravaged and wasted almost beyond belief, bent nearly double with age," she traveled around America, preaching in churches and attracting audiences that stood in line for blocks to hear her. Meeting her by chance, strangers broke down in tears of joy, remembering what her hymns had done for them.<sup>19</sup>

And what are these hymns about? They tend to be about the experience of doctrine and history—about being alone indeed, and walking with Jesus, but walking with the Jesus of traditional Christian narrative. The

<sup>17</sup> B. Ruffin, *Fanny Crosby* (n.p.: United Church, 1976) 105.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 21–22.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 13.



hymns are about walking with Jesus toward someplace, about making progress along God's path through history. The Jesus of Fanny Crosby's experience does not just tell her that all is well with Fanny Crosby, though by the time stanza four comes along he often does do that. But Jesus also surprises her into recapitulating the history of other people's walks with God. There is the walk of ancient Israel, for example, in Crosby's "All the Way My Saviour Leads Me," with its allusion to the water that flowed from the rock for Moses' journeying people in the wilderness of Zin (Numbers 20):

Though my weary steps may falter,  
And my soul athirst may be,  
Gushing from the Rock before me,  
Lo! a spring of joy I see.

Fanny Crosby's Jesus is the beautiful sun with its sunrises—and its sunset, too. Like the Jesus of the gospel narratives, this Jesus is capable both of greeting the self and of leaving the self behind. Crosby recurs to the gospel stories in which strangers encounter the wandering Jesus, but in her most popular hymn, "Pass Me Not," she crosses Luke's joyful story of Jesus' meeting with Zacchaeus (for example) with Mark's story of Jesus' meeting with the desperate man whose faith is tested by his awareness of his lack of faith (Luke 19:1–10; Mark 9:17–27):

Pass me not, O gentle Saviour,  
Hear my humble cry;  
While on others Thou art smiling,  
Do not pass me by.

Saviour, Saviour,  
Hear my humble cry;  
While on others Thou art calling,  
Do not pass me by.

Let me at a throne of mercy  
Find a sweet relief;  
Kneeling there in deep contrition,  
Help my unbelief.

Odd, is it not, that a veritable priestess among America's self-sufficient gnostics should emphasize how hard it may seem to find a role for oneself in the great drama unfolding just outside the self?

Fanny Crosby was never without religious faith. Nevertheless she suffered horribly as she tried for a real conversion experience, as she tried with all the interpretive means at her disposal to encounter the Light of the World. Repeatedly she beseeched the throne of mercy from the dirty floor of the Broadway Tabernacle in New York City:

Twice she got down on her knees and the frenzied elders all but crushed her skull, laying hands upon her head and roaring prayers for her conversion,

and twice the hours went by without her “getting happy.” Finally, on November 20 [1850], Fanny, now torn with frustration and anxiety, was led for a third time to the altar. This time she was frantic. “It seemed to me that the light must come then or never.” She was there alone that night, for no other candidates had presented themselves. For hours the deacons and elders prayed but nothing happened. The congregation began to sing Isaac Watts’s “grand old consecration hymn,” “Alas and Did My Savior Bleed.” Finally, at the fifth and last verse—“Here, Lord, I give myself away. ’Tis all that I can do”—it happened. Suddenly Fanny felt “my very soul was flooded with celestial light.” She leaped to her feet, shouting, “Hallelujah! Hallelujah!”<sup>20</sup>

Here indeed is an experience typical of “the American religion”—a religion concerned with the individual self but also a religion concerned with the self’s relationship to other selves (those frenzied, roaring elders) and to the conversion narrative that Christian literature (Watts’ hymns, Crosby’s own hymns) makes perennially available for interpretation and replication in the self’s experience.

Crosby’s excellent biographer, Bernard Ruffin, suggests: “One thing is very peculiar about this conversion experience. . . . Fanny did not join the Broadway Tabernacle—or any other church, for that matter. Nobody knows why.”<sup>21</sup> But it is really not surprising. Fanny Crosby, acting like a typical American, retained the solitude of which Bloom makes so much, the solitude of an individual experience and perspective—even while embracing and trying to practice the historical religion that was the object of her experience. She remained an individualist, if you will. Meanwhile the rich context of history and doctrine gave her interpretive powers something to interpret, her belief something to believe (and unbelieve), and her individualism something to do with itself. “My friends! I am shut out of the world, and shut in with my Lord!”—that is what Fanny Crosby would tell the immense audiences in the churches where she preached, audiences whom she greeted with the words, “God bless your dear hearts, I’m so happy to be with you!”<sup>22</sup> Solitude of this kind seems far from lonely. It is a religion of the self and of millions.

We can of course apply to Fanny Crosby the reductionist terms of current academic analysis and discover that her reported experience was merely a mask for something else—for a religion of the isolated self, uninfluenced by anything or anyone outside, or a religion of a self that was wholly constructed by ideological formations. We can, in other words, denature individual experience by depriving it of either its experiential content or its individuality. Once we have done that it will be easier for us to argue that the meaning and truth of experience are unattainable or unreportable, because we will have tossed away our capacity for recognizing experience when we see it. In terms other than those intended by Isaac Watts, father of English hymnody, we will have “given the self away.” The

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 68.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 69.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 125.

most we can hope for then will be an elegant deconstruction of experience, the sort of deconstruction that Bloom accomplishes when he describes religious conversion as "an internalization of a self already internalized."<sup>23</sup>

Such threats of infinite regress may or may not be experienced by American college professors, but they are unlikely to have affected Judge Rutherford as he waited on his patio for visits from resurrected patriarchs, or Fanny Crosby as she knelt in the dirt of the Broadway Tabernacle seeking a light from outside herself. The American religion, whatever exactly that may be, has never existed in a world of experiences that have dropped their history, interpretations that have dropped their meaningful texts, or personalities that have dropped their defining convictions about truth. American religious experience does not exist, that is to say, in the world of postmodern religious criticism. Only an analysis that treats religious experience as substantial, historical and reportable can exhibit the nature and variety of American religious belief.

<sup>23</sup> Bloom, *American* 65.