

## Moby Dick: Quest for the Alien God

モビー・ディック『白鯨』：異質なる神を求めて

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**Abstract:** Religion, for reasons difficult to fathom, summons a culture's underlying sensibility. If one is a Jungian, based on the work of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung (1875-1961), then religious impulses are one of the ways the "collective unconscious" emerges (Jung 1954:3-48). If one is a secularist, then perhaps Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) is a better guide: religious belief is a defense against nature and death (Freud 1927:31). The tens of millions of Americans with a more literal orientation toward religion would vehemently disagree with both views; for them the divine is an objective reality in everyday life. Religion in America, derived mainly from the Scottish Reformation (1560), has evolved into something uniquely its own. America's defining moment came in August 1801 during a revival that lasted a week in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, altering forever America's spiritual consciousness inherited from Europe. What is the best way to get a handle on America's love affair with God? Or is the affair one of love? Herman Melville (1819-1891), through his sublime novel *Moby Dick* (1851), poetically reflected America's outrageous spiritual expressions, predicting even what religion in America would become: oddly the individual spiritual quest in a collective context of shared beliefs. The fundamental orientations of America's spiritual life have changed little since *Moby Dick* was first published. I will highlight Melville's insights into America's homegrown religions as well as compare his great aesthetic achievement, Captain Ahab, with the founder of the *Church of the Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Joseph Smith (1805-1844), which I hope will help to gain a better sense of America's spiritual consciousness.

**Key Words:** fundamentalism, evangelicalism, secularism, dialectic, authenticity, normative values, apocalyptic, the Kabbalah.

**要約:** 宗教は、その理由を突き止めることは難しいのだが、文化の奥深い感受性を呼び起こす。ユング派なら、スイスの精神分析医であるカール・ユングの業績に基づいて、宗教的衝動は集合的無意識が現れる一つのあり方と考えるだろう。また世俗主義者なら、ジークムント・フロイトの宗教的信念は自然と死に対する防御であるという考えに惹かれるかもしれない。宗教を文字通り信じる傾向のある数多くのアメリカ人は、このどちらに対しても猛反対するだろう。彼らにとって、神聖なるものは日常生活における客観的な現実なのだから。アメリカにおける宗教は、スコットランドの宗教改革にその多くが由来するのだが、アメリカに来てかなり独特な発展を遂げている。その特徴的な出来事は1801年8月、ケンタッキーのケインリッジで1週間続いたリバイバルの時に起きた。そこでは、ヨーロッパ由来の精神的意識が永遠に変わってしまった。アメリカ人の神との恋愛関係をどのように扱うのが一番いいのか。そもそもその関係自体は愛といえるのか？ハーマン・メルヴィルは、その崇高な小説『白鯨』で、アメリカの無法な精神的表現を詩的に表現し、アメリカの宗教がどのようになっていくのかを予言さえしている。共同体で共有された宗教信念において、個人的な精神的探求が行われるという奇妙なものになると

いうのである。アメリカの精神的生活の基本的な方向性は、白鯨が最初に出版された時からほとんど変わっていない。本論文では、アメリカで発展した宗教についてのメルヴィルの考察を取り上げると同時に、彼の美的な創造物であるエイハブ船長とのちにモルモン教の創始者となったジョセフ・スミスとの比較を行う。それによって、アメリカの宗教的意識の永続的方向転換をより明確にする。

**キーワード:** 根本主義、福音主義、世俗主義、弁証法、信びよう性、規範的価値、終末論、カバラ

## 1. Introduction

Every group, however small or great, has, as such, an “individual” impulse for eternalization, which manifests itself in the creation of and care for national, religious, and artistic heroes...the individual paves the way for this collective eternity impulse.<sup>i</sup>

Otto Rank (1884-1939)

Like poetry, religion is a culmination of the growing inner self, but religion is the poetry, not the opiate, of the [American] masses.

Harold Bloom, *The American Religion*

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), bewildered by America’s untamed spiritual excesses, simply called what he saw “the American Religion” (quoted in Bloom 1992:16), an apt description of a culture that created its own individualized spiritual life based on Judeo-Christian leanings.<sup>ii</sup> Recent Gallup polls (2011) show about 92% of Americans believe in God; 90% pray and believe that God loves them; 72% believe in life after death; 80% believe that angels guide and watch out for them; 42% believe in the creationist view of human origins; and about 42% also believe salvation comes through a born-again experience based on revivalist interpretations of the *New Testament*.<sup>iii</sup>

The extent of religious belief in America is startling, representing for many an outright departure from the secularism and pluralism that form the foundations of modern life. Why venture back to more primitive ways of looking at life and discard the Enlightenment traditions that have brought the miracles of modern life? But this question may be incomprehensible to the more literal-minded in the survey mentioned above, since their beliefs center on shared meaning that informs personal identity.

Many dismiss religion’s continued popularity as coming from ignorance, poverty, or feelings of disenfranchisement, but these rebuttals, which may apply in some instances, are not generally true. Religious communities are flourishing at every level of American society, from the lowliest to the most acclaimed, at a time when America

is among the highest in levels of education and when its wealth and status have reigned supreme in the post-war world. Though the stance of its more conservative elements has been defensive, even these groups have become more outgoing since the 1960s, influencing everything from textbook choice in local public schools to policies of the national government (Goldberg 2006:8-23). All this alarms secularists. Religion has at times propelled societies forward, as it did in the Reformation (1517), but today religions tend to hold societies back and many despair of the consequences of so non-rationalistic an approach to life among so large a percentage of the population (Dawkins 2006:317-326). Many religious movements seem to fly in the face of the equally sacred values fundamental for civilization: human rights, equality, tolerance, freedom of speech, even the idea of progress (Harris 2005:11-49).

But America would not be America without the force of religion. The American Revolution (1776) was the first secular revolution in world history, but the young nation seemed to require the acidic brew of religion to dissolve barriers and forge a diverse people into a single culture. For some reason secularism was not potent enough. Religious movements in America are people's movements that occur with surprising regularity and are a deeply ingrained cultural pattern (Lipset 1964:309-314). Admittedly, at their origins they are usually opposed to Enlightenment ideals, and many always remain so (Goldberg 2006:41-44).<sup>iv</sup> What is it about the religious expressions in America that put themselves at odds with mainstream secular life? What is this "impulse for eternalization" that Otto Rank spoke of?

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), in *Future of an Illusion* (1927), declared that religion is a defense against the trauma of self-consciousness, a projection of God as a father who protects us from the cruelty of the natural world and the horror of mortality we frail humans find unbearable. Religious belief was similar to "a childhood neurosis," something humanity will eventually grow out of (Freud 1927:53).<sup>v</sup> But Freud, a genius for the ages at locating divisions within the self, could not quite incorporate spiritual impulses into his sweeping psychoanalytic theories. We wait for something more in *Future of an Illusion*, but despite its stately elegance, Freud merely reduces religion to an illusive "wish fulfillment" against death (Freud 1927:45). If this is so, then every group outlook is also a defense: political and ethnic ideologies, even psychoanalysis—any collective belief-system or perspective (Freud admitted this). Since no value, ideology, culture, or tradition has any reality independent of collective affirmation (from a non-transcendental point of view), we would merely trade one illusion (religion) for another (secular psychoanalytic realities).

Frederick Nietzsche (1844-1900), whose powers as a psychologist rival Freud's, also recognized the "group" dimension of religion, speaking of it as a collective triumph over forgetfulness. But because only what causes pain is remembered, "all religions are at their deepest foundations systems of cruelty" (Nietzsche 1887:42-43), an insight almost too dark to accept but one that rings true since pain and sacrifice are associated with all the major Western religions. Religions in the West may indeed be remembered because they were "branded in," but Nietzsche was addressing collective memory rather than spiritual impulse.

Franz Kafka (1883-1924), who like Freud did not believe in *Yahweh*, pinpoints something essential in humanity's lunge for the transcendent (Kafka 1954:29):

Believing means liberating the indestructible element in oneself... Man cannot live without a permanent trust in something indestructible in himself, though both the indestructible element and the trust may remain permanently hidden from him. One of the ways in which this hiddenness can express itself is through faith in a personal god.

Kafka's "indestructible," the boundlessness within that strives for expression—this reach for the stars—is externalized in religious visions but its underlying purpose is the expansion of consciousness. Religious quests, on some level, are metaphorical frameworks that speak to something deeper in the psyche. Harold Bloom, the American literary critic, said that religion in America is the people's poetry, and so it must emanate from more mysterious interiors than are commonly articulated by the social sciences. Shelley (1792-1822) said that poetry "is at once the center and circumference of knowledge,"<sup>vi</sup> a statement equally apt for religion. Like poetry religion conjures a culture's essence, both its center and its outer limits.

Virgil (70-19 BCE) was Dante's (1265-1321) guide through Paradise and the Inferno, and Herman Melville (1819-1891) can perhaps help to sort out some of America's many spiritual riddles (I will confine my discussion to derivative Protestant Christianity, with those toward the right of the political spectrum). In conclusion, I will hazard some thoughts on America's future as a messianic obsessed culture.

## 2. The Pequod's mystical journey

And we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world.... God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our

race and great things we feel in our soul.... Long enough have we been skeptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in us.

Herman Melville, *White Jacket* (1850)

This land was placed here by some divine plan. It was placed here to be found by a special kind of people, a new breed of humans called an American...[destined] to begin the world over again...[and to] build a land here that will be for all mankind a shining city on a hill.

Ronald Reagan, debate with Jimmy Carter (1980)

We [Americans] are a religiously mad culture, furiously searching for the spirit, but each of us is subject and object of the one quest, which may be for the original self, a spark or breath in us that we are convinced goes back to before creation.

Harold Bloom, *Omens Of Millennium* (1996)

Herman Melville, prophet of America's future as a religion-drenched nation, wrote *Moby Dick* on his small farm in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, which borders upper New York state, then a hot house of religious ferment. This area, from the Adirondacks to Lake Ontario, was known as the Burnt-Over District because of its waves of revivalism. By mid-century the *Shakers*, the *Mormons*, and the *Adventists* had already staked their perpetual claim on America's spiritual landscape. The great revival of Cane Ridge, Kentucky (1801) had blown the lid off doctrinal restraint, creating an openness for all that came later, but it is difficult to say why upper New York became the spiritual locus.<sup>vii</sup> The connection may have come from *The New Light Movement* (a belief in inner revelation), growing out of Cane Ridge,<sup>viii</sup> which had a close fellowship with the New York *Shakers*.<sup>ix</sup> Melville's stance toward this wild spiritual out-breaking can only be described as one of wonder.<sup>x</sup>

*Moby Dick* remains the comprehensive work of America's apocalyptic identity, of the nation's impulsive mission to begin the world anew, and we marvel that one person comprehended the massive aftereffects of what must have seemed to most at the time as the eccentricities of marginal groups. If the success of a mission is measured by its followers' individual transformation, then Captain Ahab and Joseph Smith (1805-1844), whom I will compare, are sublimely successful. Together they make all subsequent American religious leaders seem poor parodies.

All missions are tied to identity. As Captain Ahab's irrational hunt for the great whale, America's homegrown religions—and America itself—embark on missions that

are patently absurd, yet the mission grows out of what the religion or country believes itself to be. “Americans,” wrote Melville, “bear the ark of the liberties of the world,” and we wonder where this ark will go and what liberty will mean when it gets there. Ahab throughout his mission remains dignified, however, in ways that twenty-first century America has not. Charismatic, steadfast, magnificently articulate, Ahab, the “grand, ungodly, god-like man,” wins our esteem, though he is more murderous than the worst fictional villains. Who Ahab thinks he is remains obscure and reflects the mystery of the occult self, object of all spiritual quests.

In the beginning of *Moby Dick* we find that Ahab is no longer a *Quaker*, though he still speaks in “the stately dramatic thee and thou of the Quaker idiom,” but a convert to Zoroastrianism, the ancient Persian religion that gave the West through Judaism its most characteristic religious tenets: dualism or the struggle between good and evil beings, a future with God’s Kingdom on earth, a resurrection from the dead, immortal life, and the Last Judgment (Cohn 1993:221). For close to two millennium, Satan and God, light and darkness locked in a cosmic battle have been central to the West’s religious consciousness and will probably remain so in ever more potent forms among America’s folk religions,<sup>xi</sup> which use “Christian” idioms, as does Ahab, to convey meanings incomprehensible to traditional Protestant *Christians*.

Melville’s most profound insight is this: America’s return to primitive spiritual origins, even to pre-Christian mythologies—though always based on idiosyncratic biblical interpretations—in the quest for personal and group authenticity. America’s indigenous sects and its derivative Protestant revivalists and fundamentalists all agree they are destined for great things, each uniquely so, in the great cosmic conflagration at the end of time.<sup>xii</sup> This destiny is compelling. The *Pequod*’s mostly (dark) foreign crew and (white) American officers are equally committed to Captain Ahab (only the *Quaker* first-mate Starbuck, Ahab’s surrogate son, is never really a partisan but follows out of duty). The sheer exhilaration an adventure brings is seductive, especially when it is to confront the greatest, most powerful creature of the deep. Ishmael, the “simple sailor” and narrator said “chief among my motives,” for boarding the *Pequod*, “was the overwhelming idea of the whale himself.” A *Presbyterian* and school master by profession, Ishmael, who had become “hazy about the eyes” on land, was shaken out of “a damp, dreary November” in his soul through the voyage—as all converts are shaken from malaise and ennui. Ahab’s mission, with his return to ancient spiritual origins, parallels something of the founder of *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (commonly known as the *Mormons*).

Joseph Smith, like Captain Ahab an American original, is enchanting. Ahab has a singular freedom of spirit, a spontaneity that is the source of intimacy with the crew, qualities the charismatic Smith must have had among his followers. In 1820, at the age of fourteen Smith received his first vision—of God the Father and Jesus—in western upstate New York (Brodie 1945:20), inaugurating his short career as America’s most original visionary. Smith asked them: Which church group is the truest to the gospel? None of them are they answered. Later, in 1823 the Angel Moroni appeared (the first of five visits) to tell of a secret text that could be understood only by looking through the *Urim* and *Thummim* (meaning *lights* and *perfections*), jewels the ancient Hebrew High Priests wore on their breastplates and may have used for oracles (*Exodus* 28:30); both were buried in a box near Smith’s home. The text written on golden plates, which Smith read later using these jewels, with other seeing-stones, told of Jesus after his resurrection preaching the gospel to Native Americans, who were in reality the ten lost tribes of Israel (Native Americans were widely believed at the time to be the ten lost tribes). Smith’s translation of the plates became *The Book of Mormon*, a work that consists of over 600 pages, which he published in 1830 at the age of twenty-four. The Angel Moroni later took the golden plates away.<sup>xiii</sup>

The *Mormons*, as many other indigenous folk religions, demonstrated the singularity of Jesus’ concern for the New World, where he will return to begin the Kingdom Saint John the Divine predicted in the *New Testament’s* book of *Revelation*. Smith, as one would expect, identified the New Jerusalem (Zion): Independence, Missouri, the very heart of the nation (*Doctrine and Covenants* 57:1-3). Yet for *Mormons* the Kingdom of God is only a transitory place on the way to full Godhood. Why only be *part* of a kingdom when one can rule over one’s own Kingdom as a King? Walt Whitman (1819-1892), whose poetry today centers the literary canon of the Americas, also intuited this sense of Americans recreating their Protestant heritage for themselves by communing in their own back yards with an American Jesus transported from Judea, in *Leaves of Grass* (Whitman 1855:60):

Solitary at midnight in my back yard, my thoughts gone from me a  
long while,  
Walking the old hills of Judea with the beautiful gentle god by my  
side;

Smith’s religion is arguably America’s most representative faith, a polytheistic blend of Jewish Kabbalah and emanations from his own dazzling imagination. Nothing

in it is Protestant *Christian* except its work ethic and biblical vocabulary. Smith, aged thirty-eight, had already founded a flourishing religion when on June 27, 1844 two-hundred Illinois militiamen stormed the jail holding him and his brother Hyrum, killing them both (Smith fought valiantly).<sup>xiv</sup> Smith's kingdom of close to thirty thousand followers in Nauvoo, Illinois (the second largest city in Illinois after Chicago) had practiced "multiple marriages"—for the male elite at least. Needless to say, this huge group practicing a scandalous religion terrified the local folk, but no one knew what to do about them (killing their leader certainly did not rid America of Mormonism). The *Mormon* saga—its migration from Nauvoo and on to Salt Lake City, Utah under Brigham Young (1801-1877)—is a neglected piece of American history that rivals the Hebrew journey from Egypt to the Promised Land.

Mormonism is an authentic return to antiquity, a firm American tradition—here to the archaic cult of *Yahweh* (as Islam is a return to the primal religion of Abraham). Joseph Smith outdid all others in venturing the farthest back in biblical time, though not surpassing Captain Ahab's embrace of Zoroastrianism, to the early chapters of *Genesis* when *Yahweh* (The Eternal One), known then as the greatest among the many Gods, had a more intimate relationship with humankind: *Yahweh* personally put clothes on Adam and Eve after their expulsion from Paradise, shut the door of Noah's Ark after everyone was safely inside, grieved he had destroyed the world by a flood after inhaling Noah's sweet burnt offering, and enjoyed a picnic lunch of veal, cheese, and milk with Abraham.<sup>xv</sup> *Yahweh*, flawed and imperfect, is essentially an immortal human by nature, with superhuman powers. Smith erases all of Church history from Jesus to the *Mormon Church*, as well as the distinction between the *Old Testament* and *New Testament*, taking his followers all the way back to hints in the early *Hebrew Bible*, to Adam in the morning walking with *Yahweh* and to a new a new kind of human, the theomorphic Enoch.

Smith must have read Kabbalah, a collection of Jewish esoteric writings (though only tentative proof of this exists), since he absorbed into his religion a central kabbalistic theme from *Genesis* 5:24: "Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, for God took him." This obscure passage has inspired kabbalists, particularly those of sixteenth-century Safed,<sup>xvi</sup> to claim that "Enoch is Metatron,"<sup>xvii</sup> a statement affirming that a mortal became an immortal (Scholem 1965:132). Enoch is the fulfillment of God's original first Adam, the Adam before the creation of the world who was a fusion of God, man, and angel—*Mormon* theology, I should say, makes no distinctions between God and Adam; indeed they are one and the same. The *Book of Mormon* speaks of Enoch founding a city, Zion, which was raptured up to the heavens, someday



to descend to combine with the earthly *Mormon* city, Zion, when heaven and earth fuse into one (*Book of Moses* 7:1-69). Enoch symbolizes each *Mormon's* destiny, mortals who will become Gods. The plurality of Gods in the *Mormon* cosmos is connected with the plurality of wives, again from the ancient Hebrew patriarchs (*Doctrine and Covenants* 132:7-14):

Abraham received concubines and they bore him children; and it was accounted unto him for righteousness, because they were given unto him, and he abode in my law; as Isaac also and Jacob did none other things than that which they were commanded, they have entered into their exaltation, according to the promises, and sit upon thrones, and are not angels but are gods.

Polygamy in *Mormon* theology was the doorway to God—a teaching so audacious, one that so defied mainstream sensibility, that it enabled Smith to fulfill his sweeping insight into what makes religion work: religion becomes a reality when it creates a theomorphic people connected to an anthropomorphic God (Bloom 1992:84). In the sixty years or so the *Mormons* practiced polygamy they became a people set-apart—and not only because of persecution, though they were terribly persecuted—through an experiential mythical orientation. Smith alchemized the purpose of marriage: to not only assist God in bringing souls into mortal life, thus enabling the ultimate divine purpose of redemption, but also to begin the steps toward personal deification (not the *Buddhist* oneness with the divine, but to become a deity in one's own right). Assisting God, for God cannot accomplish his ends without humanity's assistance, is also a kabbalistic instruction from Isaac Luria's (1534-1572) "breaking of the vessels," where Jews by their good works help restore (or complete) creation by raising "the sparks of divinity" scattered throughout the universe after the cosmic catastrophe that created the world (Scholem 1965:115-17). Sanctified or Celestial Marriage furthers the divine purpose in exactly the same way. Like the kabbalistic "sparks," the *Mormon* deities (all of whom were once men) are as bound to space and time as human beings.<sup>xviii</sup>

Smith's multi-layered vision was for a complete social transformation (Bloom 1992:105). In past Mormonism the man who had many wives and many children furthers the non-creator God's plan and reproduces on earth a pattern already in heaven, also an echo from Kabbalah (Scholem 1972:56). John Shelby Spong wrote that belief in a theistic Father God keeps people in a state of immaturity (Spong 2001:22-23). But here in this theistic religion is responsibility galore, self-reliance with a difference: to

rule over one's own kingdom with as many wives as one can accumulate as a mortal progressing to immortality. This is not a religion for the faint of heart (and seems oddly to manifest the inner life of American CEOs). Smith may have amassed eighty-four wives (Celestial Marriages) in the three years from when he received this revelation in 1841 to his death.<sup>xix</sup> Smith's vision was most fully realized by Brigham Young, his successor and theocratic leader of the *Mormon* Salt Lake City, who may have had fifty-five wives that produced fifty-seven children. The United States, however, forced the *Mormons* to abandon polygamy in the 1890s in order for Utah to achieve statehood.<sup>xx</sup>

"Theurgy" (a helping of God) runs through America's folk religions, a concept that contrasts sharply with the sovereign, unchangeable, all-powerful deity that Augustine (354-430), Muhammad (570-632), Maimonides (1135-1204), Aquinas (1225-1274), Luther (1483-1546), and Calvin (1509-1564) articulated, a distant personage, in control of everything, who lives in eternity and does not need humanity's help. All missions of missionaries, whether religious or political, stem from the belief that the world is malleable, that the deity not only changes creation but changes with it (the "progressive" development of God is fundamental in both Mormonism and Kabbalah). In Mormonism humanity grows larger, divinity smaller—with God's omnipotence decreasing as human-will increases—but this brings humanity and divinity closer, yet with human-will guiding ultimate destiny. Ahab declared he had this metaphysical force of will: "What I've dared, I've willed; and what I've willed, I'll do" (Melville 1851:242)! America is *Mormon* in sensibility: free will, positive thinking, and belief in limitless potential will determine not only American but universal destiny as well. *Mormon* audacity is seen in its mission to convert the whole world—to transpose all seven billion of the world's Gentiles into the *Mormon* Chosen People.

Melville discerned that America by mid-nineteenth century had already arrogated its identity from ancient Israel as the sacred nation of its time with democracy as its gospel, an audacious (and hypocritical) appropriation indeed with slavery still within its borders. Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), after the *Emancipation Proclamation* (1862), effectively drew from this mythic reservoir when he declared that the North's soldiers in the Civil War (1861-65) "were now the missionaries of a great work of redemption, the armed liberators of millions."<sup>xxi</sup> Since then, all American soldiers in all armed conflicts have been missionaries of redemption. Refashioning the New World of the United States, the true Promised Land, is never far from America's indigenous religious or political consciousness; and this New World, however well it is (sometimes) disguised, extends to the entire world. "[T]o begin the world over again," Ronald Reagan (1911-2004) the fortieth US president declared, is America's Promethean

impulse to harmonize the rest of the world with its own messianic image. As a bearer of “the ark of the liberties of the world,” America follows the *Hebrew* narrative of sharing with Joshua *Yahweh*’s promise on the eve of Canaan’s conquest: “Every spot on which your foot treads I give to you” (*Joshua* 1:3). America, from its sectarian reinterpretations, solidified a central belief the Calvinist Reformation set in motion: The Kingdom of Heaven is here on earth, both now and forever.

### 3. Ahab’s prophetic mission

Melville explores how religious visionaries tip individual value references over with their own metaphysical goals. America’s folk religions, startling in their potency to recast psychological orientation, care less about propriety or whether practices derived from revelation are moral or amoral by mainstream standards than with living life by an unfolding revelation, always fixed on outrageously new mythological vistas. This is the freedom a Joseph Smith and a Captain Ahab drums into followers. From an early age Smith was a visionary, the source of his authority, but Ahab came to his prophetic vocation late in life, when he was nearly sixty-years old. Melville gives enough detail to show how Ahab became Ahab.<sup>xxii</sup>

Ahab lost his leg to Moby Dick on his first attempt to end the great whale. Melville leaves blank the reasons why Ahab was hunting for this particular whale (except to say it was a particularly malicious creature) while reminding readers of Jacob, grandson of Abraham and wily founder of the Hebrew nation. Jacob, who like Ahab seeks out his foe, wrestled all night with an Angel of *Yahweh*—or with *Yahweh* himself—that had come to kill him. Jacob persevered in this preternatural encounter and as Captain Ahab refused to let the creature go until it gave a blessing (*Genesis* 32:27-32):

Then he (the angel) said, “Let me go, for dawn is breaking.” But he answered, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” Said the other, “What is your name?” He replied, “Jacob.” Said he, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.” Jacob asked, “Pray tell me your name.” But he said, “You must not ask my name!” And he took leave of him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning, “I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel (face of God), limping on his hip.

Ahab, crippled by the whale that also spurred growth in him, became fully formed for his new mission, motivated now by metaphysical yearnings mixed with bitterness over loss of limb (this is when Ahab must have converted to Zoroastrianism, the religion of wholeness). Similarly, the unnamed *Elohim*, forced to bless Jacob, also imparted a new name: Israel (god-clutcher) replacing Jacob (heel-clutcher)—Jacob's name at birth came from hanging onto his twin brother, Esau—representing a new identity, a huge leap from fearful striving to a wider, more spiritual terrain. This literature, written three thousand years ago by the mysterious “J,”<sup>xxiii</sup> composer of the earliest strand of the *Hebrew Bible*, remains the sublime metaphor for renewal, paradoxically taking place through a crippling toward the things of this life.

Jacob found wholeness in his unearthly encounter and wholeness may be the enigmatic motive behind Ahab's quest for the white whale. The captain of one passing ship, the *Bachelor*, asked Ahab to come aboard for a drink, declaring that the *Bachelor* was a full ship and homeward bound. Ahab called out, in spite of their success in whaling up to that point, “Thou art a full ship and homeward bound, thou sayst; well, then, call me an empty ship, and outward-bound” (Melville 1851:708-9). In another passage, when Starbuck reported the casts were leaking, Ahab said, “Yet I don't stop to plug my leak; for who can find it in the deep-loaded hull; or how hope to plug it, even if found, in this life's howling gale” (Melville 1851:681)? Not knowing when to let go, Melville implies, arrests healing. Yet, without holding on, one cannot hope for the blessing. Did Captain Ahab find what he was looking for at the end, as a rope caught his leg when Moby Dick dove down to the ocean's depth, becoming in essence Moby Dick's war trophy? No one can answer that but Ahab.

At the beginning of the voyage, Ahab, leaking and a prisoner bound in time and space, knew only that his further metaphysical development hinged on a final contest with the great monster. Here is Ahab in his first address to his crew (Melville 1851:236):

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough.

Ahab's white whale and Smith's Celestial Marriages have exactly the same purpose—both are passageways that lift to an experiential, mythological realm beyond insufferable superficialities and repressions.

Nietzsche's prescription for healing, for him from the sickness of living in civilization, also comes through the sacredness of a hunt (voyage)—perhaps for the same reason as Ahab—to deliver the spirit from “the pasteboard masks.” Ironically, the “self-hypnosis” people cultivate to help them get along among the “masks” is also a first step to freedom, if one takes the next step to “strike through” (Nietzsche 1885:110):

There can be no doubt that such sportsmen of ‘sanctity,’ who flourish at all times and among all peoples, have in fact found a real release from what they used such rigorous training to combat—in countless cases, their system of hypnosis really helped them to escape from deep physiological depressions: which explains why their methods number among the universal facts of ethnology.

Joseph Smith, America's great mythmaking genius, devised Celestial Marriage, Baptism for the Dead, First Anointing, Quorum of the Anointed, and the American City of Zion, naming only a few, to create the *Mormon* people. Captain Ahab's imagination matches Joseph Smith's as an inventor of rituals: Ahab has groups of threes cross harpoons before anointing them with liquor in the sacred hunt, pours drops of blood from the non-Christian harpooners in the blacksmith's iron as he forges the harpoon for *Moby Dick*, and places the heads of two different whale species, a Sperm and a Right, on each side of the *Pequod* for protection against sinking. And as all religious leaders, Ahab performs a major miracle, restoring the compass after a typhoon reversed its directions, which left the crew in awe (Melville 1851:742-43). Further, Ahab has onboard in a special cabin a secret, elite group of five Parsees, led by Fedallah, as initiates into the deeper mysteries of the hunt for *Moby Dick*. And as his *Zoroastrian* Parsee crewmen, Ahab is a fire worshiper precisely because fire, a symbol of justice and truth, erases duality. Ahab's soliloquy to fire hints at the wounds he carries from past lives (from the kabbalistic teaching, *gilgul*) as well as the American theurgy of directing God. More importantly, we hear something of America's military leaders, custodians to further the sacred nation's mission to begin the world over, speaking to their technology of destruction that destroys all duality (Melville 1851:724-25):

Oh! Thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and e'en for hate thou canst but kill; and all are killed. No fearless fool now fronts thee. I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me. In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here. Though but a point at the queenly personality lives in me, and feels her royal rights. But war is pain, and hate is woe. Come in thy lowest form of love, and I will kneel and kiss thee; but at thy highest, come as mere supernal power; and though thou launchest navies of full-freighted worlds, there's that in here that still remains indifferent. Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee.

As Ahab, America's folk religions at their origins allow for the horrible in the divine, at odds with the tamed, Sunday morning deity of normative American life. The divine (the great whale) is frightening. *Yahweh*, or his angels, killed the known world with a flood, scattered humanity at the Tower of Babel, destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, pounced on Moses to kill him for no apparent reason (Moses' wife Zipporah stopped him), went from house to house killing all the first born in Egypt, could barely keep himself from destroying the nation of Israel during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness (Moses had to remind *Yahweh* of his promise), and refused to allow Moses to enter the Promised Land after forty years of devoted service (Moses was only allowed to see it from a hill top).<sup>xxiv</sup> Moby Dick may be just a phantom of the deep, the dark subconscious of Freud's theories of a conflicted psyche, or an untamed deity in exile, but he proved a worthier adversary than Jacob's unnamed *Elohim* and effortlessly sent the *Pequod* to the primordial deep in a bubbling whirlpool, leaving only Ishmael to tell the story. Something tells us that Ahab, despite stating the opposite, knew it must end that way. Did Ahab launch the mission only for awakening the occult self, as Joseph Smith may have when he made visible America's hidden inner life?

#### **4. Dates of divine visitation and America's wild deity**

Prior to the *Pequod's* sublimely horrible ending, Ahab "read the times" and seems to have forecasted precisely the day he and the great Moby Dick would meet, if we can

believe what his officers said (Melville 1851:624-25). America's folk religions, too, are obsessed with knowing when ancient prophecies will occur, especially when Jesus will return to establish his Kingdom (this obsession with the *Second Coming* includes the *Mormon Church*, though it tends not to fix dates). It also began in upstate New York (where else?), among the myriad of other revivalists in the Burnt-Over District, near Melville's small farm. Throughout 1843, in what seems like a tale from another world, tens of thousands of *Adventists* waited intermittently on hill tops for Jesus' return (*Adventists* may have numbered forty thousand, with one hundred thousand more who sympathized—a huge number relative to the population). When Jesus did not return, William Miller (1782-1849), a lay minister who had calculated the year using a prophecy from the book of *Daniel*, admitted he was mistaken—the date was in fact October 22, 1844 (Armstrong 2000:90-1).<sup>xxv</sup> October 23, 1844 dawned, bringing *The Great Disappointment*, but *Adventists*, despite Jesus' tarrying, set a precedent for predicting the *Second Coming* from the *Hebrew Bible*. Miller, absolutely sincere, lived out the rest of his days in disgrace, grieving he had led people astray, but he spawned two quintessential American denominations: the *Seventh Day Adventists* and more indirectly, the *Jehovah Witnesses*.

The early *Adventists* bequeathed a modern context for the Kingdom of Heaven's soon arrival, with the nation of Israel becoming central to all *Second Coming* prophecies. Jesus said when you see the "budding of the fig tree" that generation will not pass until all things are fulfilled.<sup>xxvi</sup> The fig tree (Israel) budded in 1948 when it became a nation (from revivalist interpretations). A biblical generation (most had believed) is forty years, so 1988 should have been the fateful year, with the faithful "Raptured," or taken up, before the seven years of the *Great Tribulation* begins, in 1981 (see footnote xii on *Christian Zionism*). Hal Lindsey's book on this topic, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), had sold over 28 million copies by 1990 (Armstrong 2000:274). Since 1988 belief in Jesus' imminent return remains, for which about one hundred million Americans are waiting (Bloom 1996:219), but with the time frame pushed back indefinitely.<sup>xxvii</sup> Widespread belief in Jesus' soon return, preposterous to secularists, expresses another facet of boundless American confidence, however inverted, of life charmed by divine favor that ultimately removes even the curse of death as heaven breaks through to earth.

Captain Ahab, in a more sobering reflection of America's religions, is not a humanist, and neither are America's sectarian expressions by and large humanistic. Dualistic in vision, obsessively urgent in quest, these groups tend to believe more in the goodness of fellow believers than in humanity, for them fallen from God's image and

devil ridden. Ahab refused to help Captain Gardner of the *Rachel*, whose son was adrift in a small whaling boat after its encounter with Moby Dick. Sternly ordering the *Pequod* to move ahead, Ahab said, “Captain Gardner, I will not do it. Even now I lose time. Good-bye, good-bye. God bless ye, man, and may I forgive myself, but I must go” (Melville 1851:762). During the year’s voyage Ahab was interested in other ships only if they furthered his quest. American sects, though recently able to cooperate along general, conservative political issues, seem as isolated as the *Pequod*, with each fellowship singularly driven by its own exclusionary theological captain. These groups only barely tolerate each other, with acrimony over nuances of mission, spiritual experience, and doctrine too intense and uncompromising. *Southern Baptists* see *Mormons* as godless heretics, and vice versa. Yet conflict reinforces their sense of uniqueness.

More ominous, America’s folk faiths tend to be theocratic not democratic, again a return to Hebrew origins.<sup>xxviii</sup> Ahab bluntly tells Starbuck: “There is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain that is lord over the *Pequod*” (Melville 1851:682), exposing a secret political theory among this large, double-digit sub-culture (see footnote xxviii on goals for “dominion”). The *Puritans*, by contrast, had exalted collective decision-making to thwart religious and political tyranny. Their names show their democratic orientation: *Presbyterian* means the rule of elected elders or regular church members, as does *Congregational*. The *Society of Friends*, commonly known as the *Quakers*, more revolutionary on this point, has no clergy; the members themselves lead worship services. This baffling step away from democracy is related to mission. Only the chosen, anointed person endowed with spiritual authority is qualified to lead, and this is a matter for divine commission not a vote. The state as a secular entity is also scorned by all these more conservative groups, which either want to overturn the separation between the sacred and secular completely or push back the secular’s domain as far as possible (Goldberg 2006:195-197).

More encouraging, and again with remarkable foresight, Melville saw the eventual mingling of the races, where in the *Pequod* “every other man was foreign born.” Ahab not only made no distinctions among his crewmen, but he assigned the Parsees and the pagan harpooners Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo as his elite whaling force (Queequeg’s earnings were three times Ishmael’s). Religious sects in America have only recently begun to take on the complexion of the *Pequod*. It was not until 1978 that the *Mormon Church* through a revelation finally opened its doors for African-Americans to become full members of the *Mormon* priesthood. Some high profile African-Americans have joined: the singer Gladys Knight and the former Black Panther



leader Eldridge Cleaver (1935-1998). The *Southern Baptist Convention*, though in 1995 formally renouncing its tortured past of supporting both slavery and racial segregation, remain somewhat segregated, with each racial group—white, Hispanic, and black—congregating more or less in separate religious services (yet in 2012 it elected its first African American president, Fred Luter, Jr.). It may be well into the twenty-first century that America's religious congregations will look more like the *Pequod*, but racially mixed communities are the general trend.

Finally, toward the end of *Moby Dick*, we glimpse the centrality of America's spiritual yearnings: the fleeting connection with the deepest self or experiential God. Compare Ahab's two speeches—the first in a moment of exaltation toward lightning and fire, the second to Starbuck on the second day of the *Pequod's* encounter with *Moby Dick*—with Ralph Waldo Emerson's journal entry of 1831:

Though knowest not how came ye, hence callest thyself unbegotten; certainly knowest not thy beginning, hence callest thyself unbegun. I know that of me, which thou knowest not of thyself, oh, thou omnipotent (Melville 1851:726).

In the matter of the whale, Ahab is for Ahab. This whole act's immutably decreed. 'Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before the ocean rolled. Fool, I am the fate's lieutenant; I act under orders (Melville 1851:804).

Were you ever instructed by a wise and eloquent man? Remember then, were not the words that made your blood run to your cheeks, that made you tremble or delighted you, *did they not sound to you as old as yourself?* It is God in you that responds to God without, or affirms his own words trembling on the lips of another (italics mine) (quoted in Bloom 1992:54).

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) elucidates Ahab's epiphanies. How old is the self? It has no beginning or ending. Ahab, though in harsher language, felt the oldness of the self: "un-begotten," "un-begun," and existing "a billion years before the oceans rolled." Incantation, symbols, and quests summon this divine spark, embedded within, to a deeper awareness that somehow has always been there. All a person can do is bring to consciousness what is already known within the deepest self. Was Ahab's quest for this awareness the reason the *Pequod* set sail? Joseph Smith, from a sermon

about two months before his martyrdom, seems to have understood that the deepest self could neither fully develop, given our mortality, nor ever be fully known, however partially it emerged through his ongoing series of revelations (The King Follet Discourse):<sup>xxix</sup>

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret...

[I]f you were to see him to-day, you would see him like a man in form—like yourselves, in all the person, image, and very form as a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion, image, and likeness of God, and received instruction from, and walked, talked, and conversed with him, as one man talks and communes with another.

I might with boldness proclaim from the housetops that God never had the power to create the spirit of man at all. God himself could not create himself...

...You don't know me; you never knew my heart. No man knows my history. I cannot tell it. I don't blame anyone for not believing my history; if I had not experienced what I have, I could not believe it myself. I never did harm any man since I was born into the world. My voice is always for peace.

Here is the mysterious center, returning to Franz Kafka and the series of metaphors that allow a context for the “indestructible” to be expressed. America's folk religions use such *Christian* idioms as “Christ within,” “crucified and risen with Christ,” “renewal of the inner man,” and “the baptism of the Spirit” to describe a form of spirituality closer to ancient “enthusiasms,” which taught a separation of the spirit (deepest self) from the soul (experiential self), than to the more intellectual European Reformation Christianity.<sup>xxx</sup> How can a person realize his or her full potential? What brings wholeness of being? What is a person's potential for transcendence? What collective beliefs will lift humanity to its highest horizon? These yearnings defy characterization, of what Otto Rank called “the eternalization impulse.” Homegrown sects in the United States answer these questions in an “experiential” context, realization through movement, action, or quest.<sup>xxxi</sup> Yet fulfillment of the quest, as the

search for the rainbow, is always over next horizon, receding as one draws closer. The *Hebrew Bible* and the *New Testament* endure, as do sacred narratives in other traditions, from this mysterious calling of something deeper within the self that answers back (at least for some). Herman Melville, Joseph Smith, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman, among many others, articulated this orientation in America's cultural idioms for the "unbegotten" divinity within. Walt Whitman expressed this best, when he articulated the deepest-self encouraging the experiential-self at the end of *Song of Myself* (1855:86):

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,  
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,  
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another,  
I stop some where waiting for you.

## 5. The future of religious experience

Truly My Satan thou art but a Duncce  
And dost not know the Garment from the Man  
Every Harlot was a Virgin once  
Nor canst Thou change Kate into Nan

Though thou art Worshipped by the Names Divine  
Of Jesus and Jehovah; Thou art still  
The son of Morn in weary Nights decline  
The lost travelers' Dream under the Hill

William Blake, *To the Accuser Who is the God of this World*

Man is in a trap...and goodness avails him nothing in the new dispensation. There is nobody now to care one way or the other. Good and evil, pessimism and optimism—are a question of blood group, not angelic disposition. Whoever it was that used to heed us and

care for us, who had concern for our fate and the world's, has been replaced by another who glories in our servitude to matter, and to the basest part of our natures.

Lawrence Durrell, *Monsieur, Or the Prince of Darkness*

In Ursula Le Guin's *She Unnames Them* (2012), Eve un-names the animals Adam had named, a parable for poetry and religion. Both are an un-naming of language, and therefore of reality, and a re-naming that ultimately overturns what has long been accepted. Both release from the confines of normative divisions as they recover more primal elements in consciousness. In *Genesis* 3 the serpent asked Eve a simple question: "Hast God said...?" "You shall not surely die" was the serpent's response to Eve's declaration from the divine. Poetry and religion, reflecting William Blake's (1757-1827) "devil's party," begin with that question and either offer an alternative or leave the answer a blank, to be filled by oneself. A religious vision, though, turns all reference points topsy-turvy, reversing what we thought was "good" into "evil" and vice versa. Blake wrote that the "son of Morn," or Lucifer, is actually the Western deity. This is the endeavor of prophets, to turn the normative deity into the devil.

Has God said there is only one "true church?" Martin Luther (1483-1546), excommunicated for heresy, turned Roman Catholicism into a heresy. Is the aristocracy the crown of humanity's glory? John Calvin (1509-1564), on whose head the French Crown offered a reward dead or alive, made the aristocracy an abomination. Are people unequal? The *Puritans*, scorned for centuries as ludicrous oddballs, championed the values of future normative life. Is religious experience only for *New Testament* times? Revivalists, reviled by secular society, transported it to present times. Has God really ended revelation with Jesus of Nazareth? Joseph Smith, murdered by an Illinois militia, founded a religion based on a new revelation to the latter day saints.

Each age as a rule has only one major poet, but religious visionaries, who are usually killed before their visions are incorporated, are even more rare. Central religions visions are multifaceted, however, and cannot be understood fully unless embraced. I admit I am not qualified to comment on Mormonism, since I see it as a cultural phenomenon. My comparison of Joseph Smith with Captain Ahab, no doubt blasphemous to *Mormons* (and perhaps to Melville scholars), is because both inhabit America's Mount Olympus, the imaginal realm that lies somewhere between truth and meaning and animates cultural identity. America today is populated by Melville's questing Ahabs and by Joseph Smith's limitless-will champions creating new worlds to rule over. Tolstoy said "the Mormon people teach the American Religion" (quoted Bloom 1992:116), so like poetry *Mormon* theology is concentrated in meaning, with

clusters of certain cultural beliefs taken to the farthest reaches. Traces of visions like Smith's filter through mainstream life, internalized more or less as part of certain dispositions people tend to have, in ways similar to a poetic outlook. If Mormonism, or any homegrown movement, causes us (Americans) to recoil, then it perhaps touches some truth deeper within or about ourselves.

Will the future belong to the secular rather than the sacred? It seems the age of the great secular mythologies ended with Nazism, Stalinism, and Maoism (replaced by the consumerism of economic globalization). Communism, with its army of devoted followers embracing a singular vision, had a quasi-religious fervor in its assault on normative Western economics and politics. Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) and Karl Marx (1818-1883) proclaimed socialism as a "scientific inevitability," with the state as the spiritual force bulldozing human advancement, but their gospel lacked the aura of divine sanction. Engels and Marx could not topple John the Baptist, Jesus of Nazareth, or Mohammad. While Communism is a logical extension of the Enlightenment's excessive scientism and monolithic perspective, the German Reformation and later piety movements formed the foundation of the Romantic Movement, the origins of modern fascism (Berlin 1999:145-46). Most Western religious movements outside the Muslim world today return to basic Romantic values to undermine secular society's assumed universalism, and this will no doubt continue. America's sectarian culture has trouble forging a monolithic challenge (though it is trying), but the influence of sectarian groups gradually seeps through society (since many, on some level, already hold such beliefs, however repressed they may be). Are secular mythologies morally superior to metaphysical ones? Though the destructive elements of America's sects that erode Enlightenment values are real (Goldberg 2006:43), they are so much more benign than the great secular mythologies of the twentieth-century: Nazism, Stalinism, or Maoism—each of which vies for the crown of most murderous in history.

Karen Armstrong, *The History of God* (1993) and *The Battle for God* (2000), said the practice of capital punishment, among other social pathologies, indicated that Americans, in spite of a widespread belief in God, are not really engaged with the divine (Armstrong 1993:398). Armstrong, a former *Roman Catholic* nun, was affirming the Reformation, and the Enlightenment that grew from it, the most powerful liberal movement the world has known, which caused generations to believe that God indeed is politically liberal. I also would like to believe that God is a liberal, but we live in a post-Reformation age, the new dispensation Lawrence Durrell (1912-1990) has described: a baser, more primal, and more materialistic dispensation. Is time progressive? Is humanity's abuse of nature that bad? Is equality a proper goal for

society? Is democracy palatable? Is rationalism the way to truth? These are some of the questions homegrown movements are answering in astonishingly hardline conservative tones.

Sigmund Freud (Freud 1930:49; 69-70) speculated after the horrible destruction from the First World War on why people at times are hostile toward civilization: Civilization enforces a restraint on more primal forces that emanate from the deeper self (id). Freud's insight, that people are not individually as "good" as the civilized standards they purportedly espouse, is painful for most to accept, since it makes hypocrites of us all. But centuries of cultivated civilization, as we have seen in the twentieth-century from Germany to China, is no antidote against sudden barbarism, but may work to encourage it.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Freud's dialectic, of a building up (superego) followed by destruction (id), is also seen in America's religious movements, which regularly shed the strictures of doctrine and liturgy by returning to a more primal faith. These movements do cause widespread upheaval. Followers, shaken out of material complacency, feel more alive than ever before, as Captain Ahab and the *Pequod* crew, who enter a bond of fellowship in their abandonment to the quest for the divine. But the cost can be great. Quests, whether launched against society, time, death, for personal liberation, for an experiential God, or for a new world are destined for a bumpy ride, not only for those inside but also for everyone nearby. Despite his exhilarating voyage, it is doubtful that Ishmael, the lone survivor of the *Pequod*, would be up for another launch in pursuit of Moby Dick. Or would he?

Finally, what does it mean to have a religious experience, a central focus of religion in America, in the absence of any objective yardsticks? For Emerson and Whitman, spiritual experience is restorative, a freedom from time, to a place before the cosmic catastrophe of creation, the internal Garden of Eden, a locus Emerson called "that former state of life." Emerson proclaimed that this pristine landscape is part of everyone's psychic territory (Emerson 1844:42):

I am to invite men drenched in Time to recover themselves and come out of time, and taste their native immortal air.... In the highest moments, we are a vision. There is nothing that can be called gratitude nor properly joy. The soul is raised over passion. It seeth nothing so much as Identity, a Perceiving that Truth and Right ARE. Hence it becomes a perfect Peace out of the knowing that all things will go well. Vast spaces of nature, the Atlantic Ocean, the South Sea; vast intervals of time, years, centuries, are annihilated to it; this which I think and feel underlay *that former state of life*

and circumstances, as it does underlie my present, and will always all circumstance, and what is called life and what is called death. (*italics mine*)

Emerson and Whitman had capacities for sustained spiritual heights and both claimed idiosyncratic resurrections with the American Christ. Melville's conclusion about the possibility for sustained spiritual heights was more somber: for most the divine is too deep within or too far without to be realized in any meaningful way. Ahab admitted he was a "leaky cast," and the fleeting moments of epiphany in his "earthquake life" are perhaps more typical of a spiritual journey than today's movements are willing to advertise. Ahab is a reflection of his creator. Later, Melville himself sailed to Jerusalem to look for the resurrected Christ among the sand dunes, ancient tombs and buildings but returned depressed. We do not know what Melville wanted to experience, but Emerson may have articulated it, if not the passage above.

Melville touched on a deeper irony: How can we know what we experience is God, if it is based on feeling? Ahab, glorying in feeling, perhaps succeeded only in burning himself out: "Ahab never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels; that's tingling enough for mortal man! To think's audacity. God only has that right and privilege" (Melville 1851:806). *Pentecostalism*, the great religious movement of twentieth-century America, has tried to institutionalize religious experience, as did movements from Cane Ridge (1801), with the baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues as some manifestations, but over time it has become more legalistic, the very thing it reacted against. Is God found in the serenity of pure doctrinal commitment, speaking in an unknown language during a religious service, from knowing the ultimate meaning of life based on scripture, or emotional exuberance and momentary release? With mistrust of language deep in the American psyche, this central goal is left unarticulated (despite Emerson's attempt). Though the way is pointed for the tens of millions who long for it, few seem to know what it means to arrive.

I doubt the wise cartographers of spiritual realms—Emerson, Whitman, Blake, to name a few—would equate sublimity with something that happens to people in their emotional ups and downs or is related to certain expectations in daily life. Those who have experienced sublimity *know* what Emerson means and those who have not cannot.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Both Emerson and Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) said, and I paraphrase, that if you want to find the meaning of life, stay home. Why? The quest is for the God within, not God without—the God outside invites calamity not sublimity. Could Ahab have had his epiphanies if he stayed home? I suspect the answer is "yes," leading to Melville's subtle critique of religion in America's greatest misconception (a

misconception he apparently shared): Is a quest for authenticity or enlightenment found in a journey of any kind—today for experience within a religious group, often toward conservative political goals (Taibbi 2008:28-60)? Though at times experience may help in opening a person up a bit, it is bound to time, as Emerson said, and does not in itself impart transcendence. I take Emerson to mean that no time-bound universal pathway exists for the experiential sublime, only the particulars of God without speaking to God within. Simon Magnus in *Acts of the Apostles*, true to the spirit of religion in America, tried to buy the baptism of the Holy Spirit from Saint Peter, but it could not be bought (*Acts* 8:5-25). The idiosyncrasies of individual capacity should also be acknowledged, as Melville has done. The Christian Gnostic Valentinus (c. 100-175) wrote of them in *The Gospel of Truth* (translated by Layton 1987:257):

A great disturbance has come to pass among the jars; for some have leaked dry, some are half full, some are well filled, some have been spilled, some have been washed, and others are broken.

A disturbed humanity with only a few jars “well filled” is a nightmare vision at odds with America’s homegrown religions more positive assertions of instant transformation for all.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The possibility for sustained heights in our sensory over-stimulated dispensation has ebbed, we must admit, and perhaps as a culture no one knows any longer what the sublime is; for in addition to innate capacity, it may require prolonged solitude, a privilege no longer enjoyed (or tolerated) by the urban masses in a visually and aurally over-stimulated age. Still, people are changed in some positive ways through their commitments, with lives centered on visionary teachings in a community of like-minded people, the reason religion remains the most common way for personal transcendence, an endeavor I hope they will succeed in.

## 6. Conclusion

Captain Ahab takes the reader on a journey through a little of America’s spiritual labyrinth. It is apt that the vehicle is a ship, a small island of shared experience—where the chosen few are congregated—with commerce the ostensible goal, in the vast and dangerous oceans to encounter the unfathomable God. Captain Ahab, though he made the crew into a “new people,” could not be mistaken for Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), composer of America’s Declaration of Independence (1776) and champion of freedom of speech, nor could Joseph Smith, who created a theocratic kingdom with himself as an



earth-bound deity. Smith's vision, I hope, is of a benevolent divine dictator, but this is by no means certain.<sup>xxxv</sup> Melville tells us that quests for the divine are fraught with hardship, with no real guarantee that any on the journey will ever really arrive. In future America, crisis conversion will remain the defining spiritual experience, as will even more creative returns to ancient Hebrew origins in quests for ultimate truth. Great new movements of revolution and counter-revolution, following the *Puritans*, the *Baptists* and *Methodists*, *Adventists*, *Mormons*, *Pentecostals*, and *Jehovah Witnesses* will continue to gather diverse peoples around a singular vision in a way that wreaks havoc on normative life.<sup>xxxvi</sup> God's popularity in America will continue to remain high and movements aplenty will offer fresh quests for the divine.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Otto Rank, quoted in *The Denial of Death* by Ernest Becker, p. 149.

<sup>ii</sup> I drew some of the ideas in this article from a piece I wrote in *America's Religion: The Brief Abstract of a Culture*, "Journal of Policy Studies," *Kwansei Gakuin University Policy Studies Association*, No. 15.

<sup>iii</sup> Please refer to polls by Gallop online, beginning with: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/147887/americans-continue-believe-god.aspx>

<sup>iv</sup> Michelle Goldberg, in *Kingdom Coming*, quotes from Rousas John Rushdonny (1916-2001), the intellectual that informs *Christian* nationalists, which may make up nearly 13% of the US population (Goldberg 2006:8). He calls for the "death penalty for gay people, blasphemers, unchaste women, among other sinners." Rushdonny said, [Democracy is a heresy...and the] "great love of the failures and cowards of life." (Quoted in a 1994 *Anti-Defamation League Report*, "The Religious Right: The Assault on Tolerance and Pluralism in America," p. 21, quoted in Goldberg, pp. 37, 38.

<sup>v</sup> The exact quote (Freud 1927:53): "In so doing, the idea forces itself upon him that religion is comparable to a childhood neurosis, and he is optimistic enough to suppose that mankind will surmount this neurotic phase, just as so many children grow out of their similar neurosis."

<sup>vi</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry*, quoted in *Genius* by Harold Bloom, p. 388.

<sup>vii</sup> America's own unique spirituality had its birth on August 6 to 13, 1801 in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, at a small *Presbyterian* Church that could hold no more than five hundred people standing. Here, among scattered pioneer folk, America's Pentecost occurred, its baptism into a spirituality that truly reflected the climate of its culture. Some estimate that up to 25,000 attended parts of the camp meeting revival (camp meetings, an American innovation, would come to characterize American revivalism unto our own day). Some compare Cane Ridge to the 1969 Woodstock Rock Festival, but the numbers relative to the population were so much greater than the half million at Woodstock, New York. Cane Ridge drew over ten-percent of Kentucky's population (225,000 according to the 1800 Census, but many also came from neighboring Ohio and Pennsylvania); it was twelve times larger than Kentucky's largest city. Furthermore, the intoxicating element at Cane Ridge was crisis conversion spirituality. In addition to forms of glossolalia, Cane Ridge, true to American over-exuberance, included falling down, shaking, trembling, jerking, dancing, and barking. "Slain in the Spirit," falling down out of a sense of repentance or renewal, was the most common experience; some were comatose for half a day (see *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost* by Paul K. Conkin, pp. 93-94, who quotes a letter from a Kentucky minister, Moses Hodge to Dr. Ashbel Green, September 10, 1801 from *Increase in Piety*, p. 53). Though some of these manifestations were typical of *Presbyterian* communion services (what the Cane Ridge meeting actually was), the magnitude and intensity of Cane Ridge exceeded all precedents and sent ripples through the country that arguably continue today, both in institutions and general social assumptions.

<sup>viii</sup> Out of Cane Ridge sprang three features that have defined religion in America ever since: 1) religion became less formal, less confessional, and more egalitarian; 2) religion became more experiential, with

“crisis” conversion the peak religious experience; 3) religion became more evangelistic, with evangelists, heralds of revival, institutionalizing features from Cane Ridge that still determine something of the moral tenor of American life today.

<sup>ix</sup> The *Shakers*, formally called *The United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearance*, were celibate revivalist *Quakers* and though they died out their revivalist tendencies remain in America’s spiritual impulses, minus the celibacy.

<sup>x</sup> Melville, who himself served on whaling ships for four years, was fascinated by what happened to the *Essex*, like the *Pequod* a *Quaker* whaling ship. In 1820 a huge Sperm whale, perhaps even larger than the *Essex*, deliberately sank it a few thousand kilometers west of South America. The whale had planned his attack well, in this tale of the hunted turning into the hunter (exactly the tale of *Moby Dick*). He quietly watched the ship from a distance before charging it, picking up momentum as he went. He knocked himself out on his first ramming of the ship, and it took him quite a while to regain consciousness. He returned to his earlier position, eerily staring at the vessel, and with his second charge he crushed the ship’s hull “like an eggshell.” Captain George Pollard and four crewmen (of the original twenty) survived the 95-day trip to South America, but all had resorted to the cannibalism of other sailors after they died of thirst, two of which were killed after they drew lots.

<sup>xi</sup> Zoroaster, the Greek rendering of “Zarathustra,” the Persian religious visionary, may have lived around 1500 BCE. The religion he founded was originally based on two deities. Ahura Mazda was gentle and full of wisdom, representing all the goodness in the world. Ahura Mazda’s twin brother, Angra Mainyu, was responsible for all the evil and death in the world. Ahura Mazda would win in the end to begin a reign of peace and harmony. This belief eventually became monotheistic, with Ahura Mazda having the greater power. Both *Jewish* and *Christian* eschatology identified Angra Mainyu as Satan, the great Archangel who rebelled against God and is responsible for the world’s evil forces, a concept foreign to normative Judaism.

<sup>xii</sup> Matt Taibbi, *The Great Derangement*, pp. 24-27 mentions the relatively new phenomenon of “*Christian Zionism*,” a widespread belief shared by both evangelicals and fundamentalists of the soon fulfillment of prophecy from the book of *Ezekiel*, chapters 38 and 39, in which Gog and Magog in an alliance descend on Israel for a climatic battle at Armageddon. This will usher in Jesus’ *Second Coming*. Gog (Russia) and Magog (Iran) have already formed this alliance. These prophecies, according to Taibbi, directly influenced the Bush Administration policies in the Middle East. According to a 1999 survey (a little dated) by the Associated Press, about 54% of both Americans and Canadians believe Jesus will return within the next thousand years, with about 24% believing Jesus’ *Second Coming* will be in their own lifetime.

<sup>xiii</sup> D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, pp. 57-65, wrote on the *Urim* and the *Thummim* and the golden plates and Smith’s obvious attempt to literalize it. This aggravates historians who want proof that the *Urim* and the *Thummim* and the golden plates existed, but it should not be taken as literally or empirically true. Joseph Smith was in a visionary state, though he later attempted to make it appear more literal. Why call it a “visionary state” instead of a hoax? Needless to say, it was not a hoax, since the proof is in the results: a religion flourishing for over one hundred and seventy years after the founder’s death. It is good to follow Melville when considering America’s spiritual origins, to neither literalize nor reject. Mormonism is indeed an authentic folk religion from an original visionary, taking this for whatever value one places on it.

<sup>xiv</sup> The *Mormons* were driven out of Missouri in 1838, the only time in the history of the United States that a state government “publicly” encouraged citizens to exterminate a particular group. Missouri State Governor Lilburn Boggs (1796-1860) issued Executive Order 44 on October 27, 1838: “The *Mormons* must be treated like enemies and must be exterminated or driven from the state for the public peace.” The *Mormons* were forced to give up their land and possessions and leave Missouri by the following spring. Mobs killed about twenty *Mormons*, with about ten thousand forced to flee to Nauvoo Illinois, where the people of Illinois at first were sympathetic to the terrible *Mormon* plight. On June 25, 1844 Smith, his brother, with a dozen or so other *Mormon* officials turned themselves in and were placed in a jail in Carthage, Illinois for ordering the destruction of the newspaper office of the *Expositor*, which had published an article about the *Mormons* practicing plural marriage. Smith had been elected mayor of Nauvoo, because it was made up mostly of *Mormons*, and so he was jailed in another city. Smith had earlier in 1844 announced he was a candidate for President of the United States.

<sup>xv</sup> The passages in order: *Genesis* 3; *Genesis* 7:16; *Genesis* 8: 20-22; *Genesis* 18:6-8.

<sup>xvi</sup> These kabbalists included some of the greatest names of Jewish mysticism: Moses de Leon (1250-1305), Joseph Karo (1488-1575), Isaac Moses Cordovero (1522-1570), and Isaac Luria (1534-1572).

<sup>xvii</sup> Metatron is mentioned in the *Babylonian Talmud* (c. 500 CE), with the injunction that one should not worship him, but was more fully developed earlier (from around the first-century BCE to the second-century CE) in *1 Enoch*, *2 Enoch*, and *3 Enoch*. In later rabbinical writings, Metatron is considered the highest of the angels and also a scribe for *Yahweh*. Metatron alone knows all the secrets of God.

<sup>xviii</sup> It is indeed amazing how the *Mormon Church* uses vocabulary identical to Protestant Christianity, yet these words mean something entirely different. Jesus Christ, for *Christians* the Third Person of the Trinity, means the God of this world for *Mormons*. Jesus' father, God, was also a Hebrew Patriarch before his journey to Godhood, as was Jesus himself.

<sup>xix</sup> Smith believed in the full conjugal rights of marriage, but it seems he sired few children from these Celestial Marriages. For the record, Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, lists only 49 official Celestial Marriages, pp. 334-347, though reports linger of many unofficial marriages. My number comes from Harold Bloom's section on "The Religion Making Imagination of Joseph Smith" in *The American Religion*, pp. 96-111. Celestial Marriage, in the *Mormon* cosmos, continues forever, reflecting the fundamental belief among American religionists, with kabbalists, that what is done now carries over throughout eternity.

<sup>xx</sup> Inevitably a new movement conforms, if it is successful (the *Jehovah Witnesses* may be one exception), followed by "reform" movements to restore what was lost. A return to simplicity was arguably Jesus' primary mission: 1) to overturn man-made divisions; 2) to bring the divine and human closer; 3) and to free people by tearing them away from the world's intoxication. Will the *Mormon Church* return to polygamy? How could it not be a possibility, so central was it to its founder's vision (pockets of polygamy continue today). With two percent of the population and growing, and with an increasing number of *Mormon* senators and congressmen, a Republican nominee for President in 2012, and a Senate Majority Leader in 2014, who knows but that one day, ages and ages hence, polygamy may be accepted in the "land of the free, the home of the brave."

<sup>xxi</sup> Lincoln, according to tradition, wrote this on the day he wrote the *Emancipation Proclamation*, September 22, 1862.

<sup>xxii</sup> A prophetic vocation, inherited from Judaism, requires complete honesty, something difficult to achieve in a society that treats "pasteboard masks," to use Ahab's words, as reality. Evidently, Ahab's vocation came through Moby Dick's attack, which pushed him beyond these pasteboard masks, inaugurating him as a prophetic leader.

<sup>xxiii</sup> The "J" writer always identifies God as *Yahweh*. In the nineteenth century, German scholars were the first to begin separating the various writers of the *Hebrew Bible*. In German "*Yahweh*" begins with a "J" sound, pronounced something like *Jehovah* in English. This author wrote some of the most beautiful literature in world history. Some literary critics have rated this author second only to Shakespeare in Western literature, and similar in many ways, since the writer's main concern seems to have been the representation of the human personality as well as the ironies at every level of life. The writer also uses a great deal of word play, as did Shakespeare. Though we think of Judaism as male dominated today, some say "J" was a woman, since most of the heroes of these stories are women; she may have been a member of the court after Solomon, or perhaps a daughter or granddaughter of Solomon, though some say "J" wrote later (see Harold Bloom, *The Book of J*, 1990). "J" wrote much of *Genesis*, parts of *Exodus* and *Numbers*, and a fragment, which I quoted regarding *Yahweh's* refusal to allow Moses in the Promised Land, from *Deuteronomy*. Her emphasis was on Judah, the small kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital, after Judah divided from Israel in the north in about 950 BCE. Of course, for hundreds of years J's work was in one book (scroll), but was cut and pasted together, probably by Ezra the Scribe, between 450 and 400 BCE, with other writers in what became known as the "First Bible." Also see Richard Eliot Friedman, *Who Wrote The Bible?* (1987).

<sup>xxiv</sup> The passages in order: *Genesis* 7; *Genesis* 11; *Genesis* 19; *Genesis* 32; *Exodus* 4:24-26; *Exodus* 12:29-34; *Numbers* 14: 11-14; *Deuteronomy* 34:1-6.

<sup>xxv</sup> *Daniel* 9:24-27 speaks of the seventy weeks of years, from when Israel was conquered by Babylon (597 BCE) and the leaders taken into exile, to the final redemption by the anointed prince's return, who makes an atonement and anoints the holy of holies.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Mark* 13: 28-31; *Matthew* 24: 29-31; *Luke* 21: 29-31.

<sup>xxvii</sup> "Pre-millennialism," the teaching largely maintained among revivalists, means that "the Rapture" (a taking up) of the true Church (*1 Thessalonians* 4:13-17) occurs seven years before Jesus' return (this would have been in 1981). After the Rapture is the *Great Tribulation*, prophesied in the *New Testament's* book of *Revelation*, a seven-year horror unmatched in human history.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Michelle Goldberg quotes from the book by George Grant (once the executive direction of D. James Kennedy's Coral Ridge Ministries), *The Changing of the Guard: Biblical Principles for Political Action*: "Christians have the obligation, a mandate, a commission, a holy responsibility to reclaim the land for Jesus Christ—to have dominion in civil structures, just as in every other aspect of life and godliness. But it is dominion we are after. Not just a voice. It is dominion we are after. Not just influence. It is dominion we are after. Not just equal time. It is dominion we are after. World conquest. That's what Christ has commissioned us to accomplish. We must win the world with the power of the Gospel. And we must never settle for anything less.... Thus, Christian politics has as its primary intent the conquest of the land—of men, families, institutions, bureaucracies, courts, and governments for the Kingdom of Christ" (Goldberg 2006:40-41).

<sup>xxix</sup> Please see the entire sermon, from the notes of four followers present: <http://www.mrm.org/king-follett-discourse>

<sup>xxx</sup> Please see *The Greeks and the Irrational* by E.R. Dodds and *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion* by Ronald A. Knox.

<sup>xxxi</sup> It is difficult to say why American religious orientation from Cane Ridge became experiential, but it must have something to do with American continental "space," the vast frontier that European settlers could not fathom and which had no history according to their conception of it. This "space," Americans filled in with present tense experience that spilled over into religious orientation.

<sup>xxxii</sup> The gruesome violence of the First World War, Freud understood, was a bizarre release from civilization's intolerable constraints. Freud (Freud 1930:38; 72-72) felt that Europeans created anti-Semitism, the vicious hatred of Jews, because they blamed Jews for Christianity, the blanket of severe morality that stifled inner life (all the writers of the *New Testament* but one, according to tradition, were Jewish—including Jesus of Nazareth himself). Freud was not surprised, therefore, when the Nazis after taking power in Austria in 1938 also wanted to kill him. Freud was only able to escape to England because of his renown to live the last year of his life.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> In *Civilization and its Discontents* (pp. 10-11) Freud was disconcerted, after a friend wrote in response to *The Future of an Illusion* to inform him of his own oceanic spiritual experiences, because Freud could not find anything transcendental within himself. Freud felt this sense came from early childhood expansiveness that lingered in the consciousness. Like most of Freud's "frontier" concepts, this one as well cannot be easily disproven.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> The American folk religions, with their priority of crisis conversion (this excludes the *Mormons*), is at least "democratic" in offering of an experiential religion for all, but this may be because conversion is part of mass media campaigns.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Orson Pratt (1811-1881), the *Mormon Church's* great theologian, wrote: "The Kingdom of God is an order of government established by divine authority. It is the only legal government that can exist in any part of the universe. All other governments are illegal and unauthorized. God, having made all beings and worlds, has the supreme right to govern them by His own laws, and by officers of His own appointment. Any people attempting to govern themselves by laws of their own making, and officers of their own appointment, are in direct rebellion against the Kingdom of God" (quoted in Bloom 1992:93).

<sup>xxxvi</sup> See Seymour Martin Lipset (1964), *Religion and Politics in America, Past and Present*, "Revolution and Counterrevolution," pp. 309-314.

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