

ONE SPRING, MANY RIVERS: HOW ANCIENT ALTERNATIVE CHRISTIANITIES ENDURED

Standard histories of Christianity tell of the heresies that have broken off from that faith over the centuries, the many movements that gained some support at a particular time or place, but ultimately withered and died. Usually, these ideas are depicted as florid and bizarre, wild distortions of basic Christian truth. Yet the historical evidence presents a radically different picture both of the Christian norm and of its supposed fringes. We must see these alternative creeds not as deviant aberrant forms of Christianity, but as basic variants of the faith that always have and always will reappear in various forms within the Christian tradition.

Christians have always claimed to represent a New Covenant, a New Revelation, but just how radical a break with older religious and social structures did the message of Jesus constitute? Throughout history, a great many believers have proclaimed teachings far more sweeping, innovative and subversive than those proclaimed by the churches, and they offer warrants for their beliefs no less convincing than can the orthodox themselves. An ancient definition of Christian orthodoxy portrays it as "that faith which has been believed everywhere, always and by all." Yet no less than the orthodox, the radicals can likewise claim to stand in a continuity dating back to apostolic times, and preached in many lands. We cannot understand the history of "mainstream" orthodox Christianity as we know it except by appreciating the constant pattern of dialogue, debate and confrontation with the alternatives, the so-called heresies.

One Spring, Many Rivers uses the radical variants of faith to explore the nature of Christianity itself. No-one reading this book will ever again be so confident about claiming to ground themselves in "the historic Christian tradition".

The Age of Faiths

Many recent books portray the ancient Christian world as wonderfully diverse, marked by competing spiritual and intellectual currents, and by many roads not ultimately taken. Many authors have stressed the importance of the Gnostics and other early strands of Christian belief, which found expression in the gospels that have been rediscovered in modern times; Bart Ehrman traces the story of the *Lost Christianities*. In the words of Gregory Riley, scholars trace "How Jesus Inspired Not One True Christianity, But Many". This freewheeling diversity seems to have collapsed from the fourth century onwards. Later generations could only recall it nostalgically as something that existed "before the dark times: before the *Empire*."

But this account of ancient glory and later collapse is a historical mythology, following a pattern that in various forms appears in most religions. In reality, the history of Christianity in medieval and early modern times is in every sense a vastly larger and more varied story than such a picture would imply. Against the received version of Christian history, I would suggest a quite different picture:

- *The lost Christianities were never lost. The full range of ancient alternative Christianities continue to exist and flourish in Europe through the Middle Ages and into the Early Modern Era, when some at least become identified as Protestant movements.
- *We can trace convincing continuities from the Christianity of the ancient Mediterranean through the so-called heretical movements of medieval Europe, which are better understood as legitimate alternative interpretations of Christianity.
- *The medieval heresies may authentically have been what they claimed to be, namely direct heirs of the earliest Christian movement.

- *There is a direct inheritance from at least some of these movements to the Reformation Era, and to later Protestantism.
- *Once we appreciate these long continuities, we see how these ancient teachings survived up to the present day, and shaped mainstream churches across the ecclesiastical spectrum.

Put another way, most or all of these archaic spiritual roads *were* in fact taken, and we are only now beginning to trace the paths they took over the millennia.

Medieval Christianity was complex and polychromatic, generating many different forms of faith. Partly, this was because religious thought and experiment were never as closely supervised as churches affected to believe, but the power of orthodoxy was particularly weak on the fringes of Christian empires, and enforcement ceased to function altogether beyond those frontiers. These border areas served as laboratories of faith, from which ideas and movements could be freely imported into Christian Europe. Many diverse variants of Christianity co-existed, and they behaved very much like the movements of the earliest church. Christianity never ceased evolving from the grass roots.

As to what these fringe ideas were, they included themes that are still startling today – some attractive to the modern observer, others repulsive. For many Christians, Jesus was the son of the good God, not the evil one of the Old Testament: the New Testament stood in absolute opposition to the Old; true believers must abstain from sex and meat-eating. For believers in the Free Spirit, everything reported in the Bible applied to inner, spiritual realities, rather than to events in historic Palestine: the Resurrection of Christ took place within the ordinary believer, who could return to the Garden of Eden, and who was incapable of sin. God is Nature and Nature God. In such movements, literally no part of familiar orthodoxy could be taken for granted: not the doctrines of Trinity or Incarnation, not Virgin Birth nor Resurrection, not Atonement nor sacraments.

On the other hand, many sects taught such curious – and very widespread – beliefs as that women were the spiritual equals of men, and gender equality was an absolute imperative; or that God continued to reveal truth through ordinary believers. For many sectarians, the institutional church was the synagogue of Satan, and all the clergy deceivers; they held that every form of sacrament and devotion taught by the church is of the devil, a weapon to distract believers from their inner spiritual quest. Across the faith spectrum, we find the common idea that that real Christianity is a faith that can only be practiced by an elite, and is not available to the common herd. Many ideas that we today associate with the New Age or esoteric fringe would have been quite familiar to Christians in the Middle Ages, or indeed in all periods of Christian history.

Nor are we dealing solely with clandestine subterranean movements living in perpetual fear of orthodox inquisitors. Radical and wildly unorthodox Christian sects dominated whole territories and operating functioning states, even in the heart of Europe itself. And there were whole European nations where contemporary outsiders genuinely did not know whether established churches were teaching standard orthodoxy or gross heresy. In cities and villages, we regularly find organized alternative institutional networks that often amounted to parallel churches, with national and international ties. These underground churches existed over several centuries, using their own secret codes and languages. We might well ask: how many churches existed in medieval Europe? Dare we think of them in the modern sense as competing denominations? And heretical ideas remained in constant dialogue with what we think of as mainstream Christianity, cropping up among bishops and clergy of the Catholic and Orthodox churches, to say nothing of the ordinary faithful.

Whatever established church authorities felt about the fact, the spectrum of religious belief in medieval Christendom – whether in 900 or 1100 or 1300 - was actually broader than in the North America of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. In fact, it looks very much like the Christianity of

the earliest centuries; or indeed, of modern times. Nobody in the European Middle Ages would have been startled to observe the menagerie of American sectarianism and fringe religion, from the esoteric to the spiritualizers, from the prophetic to the mystical: the worlds of Mormons and Pentecostals, Transcendentalists and Christian Scientists, Shakers and Spiritualists, cults and communes; the followers of Anne Hutchinson and Mary Baker Eddy, Joseph Smith and Edgar Cayce.

No less startling, we can trace direct connections between so-called heretical movements of the twelfth or thirteenth centuries and the very earliest ages of the church. Although colleges and seminaries teach that the great heresies were wiped out in the fourth and fifth centuries, these doctrines – Adoptionism, Montanism, Encratism, and so on – never ceased to surface in the high Middle Ages and later. We will see how naturally the later movements grow out of ancient Christian ideas and texts, and, arguably, just as authentically. Even the most seemingly bizarre sects commonly relying on readings of familiar New Testament passages that to modern eyes seem eccentric or shocking, but which were in fact commonplace and historically rooted. Well-loved parables like the Prodigal Son became foundational texts for radical Gnostic or Dualist thinkers. And as long as there have been Christians, they have continued to produce new gospels, long after the time of the famous Nag Hammadi trove of the fourth century.

In light of these truly ancient survivals, this primitive continuity, we might well ask just what can we legitimately term the mainstream of Christian faith, and how “fringe” were indeed its supposedly marginal expressions? Did these alternative movements keep alive the oldest Christianity through the long centuries? Can any form of Christianity claim to be any more historically authentic than any other?

A Heritage of Truths

Moreover, these now forgotten alternative Christianities have a direct relevance for contemporary religions, including Islam. Muslim states took over the areas in which many of these sects flourished in the Near East and Balkans, and absorbed many of their ideas and practices.

But we also see a direct inheritance into Protestantism. Looking at the history of their churches, most Protestants assume that once their ancestors could read the Bible, they would automatically find their way to the authentic Christianity of the earliest ages, but the story is much more complex, and more subversive. In fact, Protestantism built upon and incorporates older traditions, and would not have had the immediate and broad appeal it did unless it spoke to these half-forgotten subterranean traditions. Much to their horror of modern-day believers, we can see ideas very comparable to later Protestantism running through the medieval sects, though often associated with wildly heterodox ideas about Dualism and the evils of the flesh, or with the view of the Christian story as a purely internal and symbolic drama, unconnected to external history. And such themes surface in the thought-world of such esteemed proto-Protestants as Wycliffe and the Lollards, William Tyndale, and many German Reformers. A direct strand of continuity runs from stigmatized medieval sects like the Paulicians and the Free Spirit through the Radical Reformation, through the Anabaptists and Quakers, and their countless offshoots in later American history. Much of the later story of Protestantism involves the repeated surfacing, repression and reappearance of these alternative ideas, which remain in constant dialogue with more orthodox formulations of faith.

The more we look at the medieval centuries, the less novel anything in the Reformation era actually seems, and the more striking the religious continuity from the first and second centuries through the modern era. We need to erode, if not eliminate, the idea of the Reformation era as *the* critical turning point in the history of Christianity, which is how it is regarded by many contemporaries, especially Protestants. Clearly, it is a vastly important event, even a revolution. But

the Reformation added very little to Christian thought or practice that had not been there long before - indeed, had always been there. The Reformation marks a change of scale, not of substance.

Central to this story is the notion of authority, and the finality of the revelation handed down in the Christian scriptures and the church. In fact, the tradition of Christian prophecy and direct inspiration never ceases. A direct line can be traced from the Montanists of the second century through countless medieval *prophetiae* and on to ... where does the story end? With Joseph Smith? The countless prophets of modern-day Africa? It certainly continues into modern Pentecostalism. As Pentecostal and charismatic forms of Christianity are achieving such astonishing breakthroughs around the world, especially in the global South, we recognize that these trends are anything but new, and in different forms have existed throughout the history of the faith. This recognition helps us understand both the Christian past and present. In terms of the modern world, it challenges any suggestion that Pentecostalism is an upstart sect with weak Christian credentials. I am in a sense exploring the roots of contemporary global Christianity.

Several features make this book so distinctive:

- **One Spring, Many Rivers* offers a radical re-evaluation of Christian history, no less than a rediscovery of the forgotten spectrum of belief and practice as it has existed throughout the history of the faith. At every stage of its existence, the reality of Christianity – or perhaps we should employ the plural – is vastly larger than popular impressions suggest.
- *Some scholars have traced the subterranean history of lost Christian traditions over the past two millennia, noting the strength of medieval Gnostics and Dualists. Yet the Gnostics, broadly defined, have received vastly disproportionate attention in recent years. In reality, many other forms of non-orthodox Christianity flourished, some just as evocative and enticing to modern readers as the Gnostics. My book would cover the full spectrum of alternative Christianities, without either seeing them as confused proto-Protestants, or else subsuming them under the over-extended label of “Gnostic.”
- *I aim to make the broad range of alternative Christianities comprehensible to a modern readership, no mean task when early authors so enthusiastically compiled overwhelmingly lengthy and confusing catalogues of –isms. Most of these can in fact be reduced to several major traditions, and when we see them in this light, we begin to appreciate that Christianity has always included a similar and familiar range of approaches, of responses to faith.
- *I expand the well-known list of Christianity’s great innovators and thinkers to include many of these individuals who are often sidelined as heretics, but who deserve rather to be seen as links in a broader Christian tradition.
- **One Spring, Many Rivers* would be firmly based on the very large available corpus of materials from the sectarian groups themselves, from their gospels, catechisms and tracts to records of inquisitions and interrogations.
- *In order to make this story comprehensible, I will divide the movements into broad categories, covering each trend or group in a chapter, but at every stage, I will stress how easily ideas and themes migrated between different movements, and indeed into the orthodox churches.
- *This historical perspective raises fundamental questions about the nature of Christianity and the development of its different movements and denominations. To oversimplify, I suggest that virtually nothing in modern Christianity is as new as is claimed, and that every modern aspect of the faith has always flourished in earlier eras, including in early and medieval times. This comment extends even to psychologically-oriented internalized forms of the faith, the

kind of modern-seeming idea that people refer to when they claim to be “spiritual but not religious”. We have been here before.

- *I have an unusual perspective on this story, as in addition to my historical training, I am also experienced in studying new religious movements, the world of “sects and cults”, and throughout the book, I would bring this background to bear. I will explain why different groups gained or lost influence in different eras; the kind of unmet needs that they fulfilled; and how they appealed to constituencies ignored by established churches.
- *To study the alternative deviant forms of Christianity is essential to understanding the mainstream manifestations of faith. No sharp lines separated the worlds of orthodox and heretics, and alternative ideas appear within the churches with surprising frequency, even among highly-placed clergy and scholars.
- *My book would thus have a broad interdenominational appeal, over and above its interest for the general readership that would be my primary target.

SOME SPECIFIC POINTS AND THEMES

For the sake of convenience in what follows, I will refer to “heresies” when a more appropriate and objective term would be “alternative forms of Christianity that are conventionally labeled as heresies”.

*Historians of the early church describe a familiar range of heresies: Gnostic, Montanist, Encratite, Marcionite, Antinomian, Manichaeism. But to put this comment crudely, pick any era from 500 to 1500, and I can identify each of these strands operating somewhere within the Christian world, quite possibly as a mass movement dominating whole territories.

*Standard histories see the heresies as spinning off from the orthodox mainstream church. Many were in fact parallel or even pre-existing traditions, surviving in the old borderlands of the Roman Empire and repeatedly re-pollinating Western Europe.

*Far from being confined to the distant fringes of society, heresies offered very widespread alternatives, to the point of dominating whole realms. For instance, although European churches fondly believed that they had eliminated Dualist heresies by the late Middle Ages, the state and official church of Bosnia were probably Dualist for centuries.

*No sharp line separated heresies from the mainstream church. The great Syrian and Mesopotamian churches were strongly influenced by puritanical and near-Dualist views, and we find similar influences in Europe. When the French cleric Gerbert became Archbishop of Reims in 991, he took an oath affirming the sanctity of both Old and New Testaments, the legitimacy of marriage and eating meat, and the existence of a spirit who was evil by choice rather than nature. That is, he was under suspicion of holding standard Dualist opinions. And Gerbert became Pope shortly afterwards.

*Medieval European heretical churches continued to have access to apocryphal “hidden gospels”, some truly ancient.

*The process of writing new alternative gospels continues through the Middle Ages, and many of these texts are easily available, and cry out for rediscovery by a popular audience.

*Much later heretical churches used rituals and liturgies that appear to have roots in the first and second centuries, though these have seldom been recognized as authentic primitive texts. As a prime example of this, I offer the amazing Lyons Ritual, which surfaces among the Cathars in thirteenth century France. This includes a number of rituals, including a confession, and a form of consolamentum, the Immersion in the Perfect Community. Neither draws on any text except the New Testament, chiefly the gospels and epistles, and the closest parallel to the Immersion comes in Jesus's commissioning of the apostles in Luke 9. So close in fact is the Cathar ritual to the ancient Baptism of the Catechumens that modern scholars have suggested a direct inheritance. This seemingly medieval text is probably a direct translation of a Greek document from the second century.

*Quite apart from any traceable continuity, Medieval Christianity kept on re-evolving movements that held ideas exactly akin to those of the ancient heresies, suggesting that these ideas are an integral or logical outcome of the Christian tradition, and of reading the New Testament. The question arises: if antinomianism or Dualism grows so naturally out of Christian belief, should these themes not be viewed as just as authentically Christian as the historic mainstream?

*For Christian readers, it can be unsettling to see how heavily heretical thinkers drew on very familiar scriptural texts, in which they found meanings utterly at odds with what we have come to regard as normal. Dualists loved the parable of the Prodigal Son, casting the Devil as the Prodigal, and Jesus as the boring stay-at-home Son. On occasion, "alternative" readings of the parables actually seem to make much more sense than do the conventional ones!

*As in the earliest times, women always represented a large component of the alternative movements, partly because their spiritual needs were not accommodated within the mainstream churches. In consequence, many of the sects tended to evolve women leaders and prophets, with appropriate doctrines and scriptures. No account of women's spirituality in the long Middle Ages – say, from 500 through 1650 – can omit the fundamental role played by women in the alternative movements, as prophets, spiritual mentors, as bishops and priests. Although I don't propose to do so, it would be quite feasible to write this book entirely in terms of women activists and thinkers.

*Again, there is a heavy overlap between the heresies and the mainstream church through medieval orders like the Beguines, who offered a middle way between married and conventual life; and who were often linked to Free Spirit doctrines and networks.

*I expand the well-known list of Christianity's great innovators and thinkers to include many of these individuals who are often sidelined as heretics, but who deserve rather to be seen as links in a broader Christian tradition.

*Heresy has always shaped and redefined orthodoxy. Throughout Christian history, mainstream churches have adapted, often quite radically, to meet external challenges: we think for instance of how the Protestant Reformation sparked the transformation within Roman Catholicism, in the so-called Catholic Reformation. But such feedback responses have always occurred. In the thirteenth century, for instance, the Church responded to the heretical threat by evolving new orders of friars, who met the needs of believers who had hitherto been forced to look outside the approved boundaries of faith.

*Especially in Europe, there is a direct inheritance from the old Christian heresies into Islam, in terms of mystical practice; and also of the survival of certain hidden gospels that still today remain very popular among Muslims across the Middle East.

*Understanding these medieval movements must transform our approach to the Reformation, which is often thought of today as a light being turned on after a millennium-long Catholic night. I question whether that the religious and denominational diversity of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was particularly new, nor were most of the radical innovations of that era. In fact, throughout the Middle Ages, we can trace movements that seem proto-Protestant, with the same kind of anti-clerical, anti-sacramental and anti-Marian thought. Very little preached in (say) German or English Protestantism in 1580 would have surprised a Paulician in 700, a Waldensian in 1150 or a Lollard in 1400.

*Such a comment about long-term continuities seems to mesh with the traditional Protestant taste for identifying predecessors throughout the Middle Ages. I differ from such readers in stressing that in virtually every case, it is impossible to draw a strict line separating them from what today seem bizarre heresies, especially shades of Dualism.

*This continuity is especially strong in the Radical Reformation, which produces the Anabaptists, Quakers, Ranters, and so on. All these movements are thoroughly rooted in the old Free Spirit tradition.

ONE SPRING, MANY RIVERS

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1.A BABEL OF TONGUES

This introductory chapter would outline conventional assumptions about the outlines of Christian history, and particularly the dreadful associations that have come to be attached to medieval Christianity. I would describe the theory that, from the time of Constantine onwards, the democratic, egalitarian and Spirit-filled Jesus Movement atrophied into the repressive, bureaucratic Catholic Church of the Middle Ages. Through the Middle Ages, therefore, the Christian experience was constrained within the narrow orthodoxies of a monolithic Catholic Church, which replaced the “many Christianities” of the earliest centuries. In contrast, I will show that, centuries after Constantine’s time, many forms of Christianity continued to co-exist alongside the familiar Catholic/Orthodox mainstream, and offered serious and steady competition to that model.

Although it has been amply publicized by modern scholars, the extreme diversity of ancient Christianity is by no means a recent discovery. At least since the nineteenth century, scholars have acknowledged the very wide range of ideas that circulated in the early church. In the three centuries after Jesus’s time, his followers debated endlessly about the meaning of his life and teachings, and many drew conclusions radically at variance with what became the orthodox doctrines of the mainstream church. Some posited a sharp contrast and conflict between the material and spiritual realms, seeing Jesus as the teacher or redeemer who had come to overthrow the material world, and to establish the spiritual kingdom. Gnostics believed that Christ had come to teach the secret doctrines and formulae that would allow his disciples to return to that spiritual realm. Docetists denied that Jesus could have taken the form of flawed physical matter, so that his crucifixion must have been an illusion. Adoptionists found the notion of God Incarnate blasphemous and illogical, so they taught that the spirit of Christ descended upon Him only at the moment of his baptism. Marcionites believed in a radical conflict between the Old and New Testaments, and of their respective gods. Condemning matter, Marcionites and other sects followed the Encratite doctrine that prohibited sex, food derived from animals, and wine. Montanists taught that Spirit-filled

prophets continued to issue new doctrines binding on the churches. All these approaches had dramatic implications for the role of authority in the Christian community, the place of inspiration and enlightenment, no less than for everyday conduct and morality. And these beliefs long predated the later controversies over the meaning of the incarnation and Trinity. Considering this menagerie of sects and creeds, we may well think that the differences that separate Christians today look very slight indeed.

And these ideas were widespread, and influential. As far back as 1934, Walter Bauer argued that in different areas, these heterodox ideas may at times have represented the mainstream of Christian belief, and that what we later call “Orthodoxy” was in fact one particular set of dogmas that happened to triumph because it won official approval. While we can certainly debate that idea, we cannot deny the attraction of these doctrines, which never entirely died out in the Christian world, especially in the East. Far from fading away, some of these beliefs continued to roil the Catholic/Orthodox churches right up to the Reformation Era, and beyond.

2. JESUS IS THE SON OF THE GOOD GOD, NOT THE EVIL ONE

One of the most famous medieval heresies was that of the Cathars or Albigensians, who created virtually a free-standing state in southern France, until they were annihilated by a Catholic crusade in the thirteenth century. Usually, the Cathars are discussed in terms of a heresy growing out of the Church, but their pathetically few surviving documents suggest a startlingly different picture. Although these texts surface only around 1250, neither in language nor doctrine do they differ substantially from known Christian sources of the second century. Far from looking like a breakaway sect, or an offshoot of Manichaean faith, the Cathars had at least a solid claim to be following the most primitive forms of Christianity as did their persecutors.

This example illustrates the stunning survival of early diversity through medieval times. Although so many writers lament the passing of the ancient heresies and alternative forms of Christianity, even the Gnostic and Dualist sects that the mainstream church regarded as its deadliest enemies continued to flourish for a thousand years after Constantine’s time, literally from Spain to China. Two sects in particular, the Bogomils and Paulicians, emerged from the tenuously held eastern borders of the Roman Empire, in Armenia, Syria and northern Mesopotamia, and both won transcontinental influence. The Bogomil inheritance is well known through their Albigensian successors, but other Dualist states and statelets continued long afterwards. Bogomil ideas dominated whole national churches in the Balkans. Throughout the Middle Ages too, dissident believers wrote and venerated new gospels which kept alive ideas very similar to those of the famous “lost gospels” of ancient times.

Plenty of books tell us about the medieval Dualists, which even feature in the *Da Vinci Code* mythology, but I offer a quite different perspective. Instead of seeing them as heretical breakaways, as a strictly medieval phenomenon, I will stress the continuities authentically linking such sects to the very oldest Christianities of Syria and Mesopotamia. Their ideas offer a compendium of second century heresies, yet they were at their political height between the ninth and twelfth centuries, and their successors survived in the Caucasus into the Soviet era. The Paulicians maintained continuities from Dualist heresies to the anti-clerical and iconoclastic assumptions of later Protestants.

In suppressing the Albigensians, then, European Christians were not merely engaged in a counter-insurgency within their own church, but were rather confronting a disturbingly different variant of Christianity, which had ramifications across Asia and Europe. Only after 1250 could European churches claim victory over Asian-derived variants of the faith that, according to most standard histories of Christianity, should properly have vanished several centuries previously.

I would also stress the extraordinarily wide range of geographical connections and influences among these movements. Bogomil ideas can for instance be traced from the Near East to Bulgaria and then to France, however many national and imperial boundaries had to be crossed in the process. Exactly the same pattern can be traced from other movements, such as the Free Spirit. Christian belief and practice has never been limited to Europe, nor constrained by the political realities of that continent.

3. HEAVEN IS HERE AND NOW

Although modern historians have traced the Dualist heresy through the Middle Ages, other quite distinct traditions continued to flourish through long centuries. The most important by far was the now largely forgotten Free Spirit movement, which was pantheist, mystical, antinomian and anarchistic. A distinct tradition, and institutional continuity, can be traced from the Early Middle Ages through the seventeenth century. John Wesley even debated with Free Spirit followers in the mid-eighteenth century.

From an orthodox perspective, the doctrine of the Free Spirit ranked among the most persistently dangerous and frightening alternative forms of Christianity. The Free Spirit represented an enduring claim to Divine inspiration, teaching that Biblical revelations reflect inner spiritual realities, rather than to events in historic Palestine: the Resurrection of Christ took place within the ordinary believer. This was exactly the psychologizing approach that Elaine Pagels highlighted as characteristic of the ancient Gnostics, but which ran through the medieval heresies, and indeed through early modern movements like the Family of Love, Ranters and Diggers. For these movements too, the believer's goal was to return to the innocence of the Garden of Eden, a place situated between five rivers – that is, the rivers of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. (The Gospel of Thomas taught that Paradise had five trees, rather than rivers, but the message was the same). Accordingly, the true Christian needs no institutional structures, nor need she or he obey worldly rules and mores. God was no outer reality, but was rather the Light Within, which must be obeyed to the point of death. And the movings of the Spirit within the individual believer superseded both the words of scripture and the teachings of the church.

Free Spirit ideas can be found in literally every era of Christian history, and they were at least as common across the Christian world in the tenth or the fourteenth century as they would be in the English-speaking world of the seventeenth or nineteenth centuries. Whether we look at Northern Europe or Armenia, France or Syria, we can see that George Fox and Ralph Waldo Emerson had literally thousands of predecessors, in a sequence dating back to the early Gnostics. And while rejecting churches or hierarchies, Free Spirit adepts maintained impressively innovative structures, clandestine networks connecting cells of believers across nations and continents. It is moreover within this Free Spirit movement that we find the most systematic expressions of gender equality and indeed radical Christian feminism.

4. I SPEAK WITH THE TONGUES OF ANGELS

In the modern world, the most conspicuously successful forms of Christianity are the Pentecostal and charismatic churches, with their emphasis on direct access to the divine, through prophecies, visions and dreams, and their tumultuous Spirit-filled worship style. Particularly in the global South, in Africa, Asia and Latin America, Pentecostalism clearly represents the cutting edge of Christian expansion, and even the older mainstream churches have been forced to absorb its doctrines and practices.

Although this charismatic Christianity is often seen as a new departure, a historical view shows that it is anything but new. Churches over the centuries have struggled to cope with prophets and visionaries, and in some eras have been successful in appropriating them for the faith, giving them the status of saints and holy hermits. In others, such figures have been declared heretical, and appear as the dreaded leaders of seditious or insurrectionary movements, like the military millenarians who were such an alarming feature of medieval and early modern Europe. When modern Pentecostals speak in tongues, they are acting very similarly to the ancient communities known by Saint Paul, and to the later Montanists and Paulicians. Christianity has always spawned its prophets, healers and miracle-workers, and that these have been central to the success of the faith. While there never was one “The Church”, nor were individual churches composed of docile sheep who obeyed whatever the clergy told them.

Whether inside or outside the church, prophets and visionaries have constantly tested the limits of Christian doctrine, forcing Church authorities to decide on the finality of the revelation received in the Bible and the councils. Not just in modern times, churches have always had to confront claims that true spiritual authority is found in ecstasy as much as in sober reasoning.

5. THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

After the Reformation, Protestant historians ransacked older records to find predecessors, claiming even groups like the Albigensians as precursors of Luther – although in reality, some of these alleged precursors held ideas that would have led to their execution if they had been expressed in the new Protestant states. Yet other groups were much more promising, and did indeed represent a convincing continuity lasting centuries before the time of Luther. Several movements taught a proto-Protestant set of ideas, including lay access to the Bible, anti-clericalism and anti-institutionalism, the rejection of hierarchy and sacraments, and esteem for personal piety. This package can be found, for instance, among the Paulicians and Messalians, the European Waldensians, and later English Lollards and Czech Hussites.

Like some other groups, at least some of the Bible believers succeeded in overcoming deadly official opposition to build their own state, in the form of Hussite Bohemia that defied all crusades and invasions for over a century. Even within Europe, the Middle Ages was an age of Christian *faiths*, rather than of Faith.

6. THE MYSTICAL MYTH

According to many accounts of the early church, the ancient and long-vanished Gospel of Thomas testifies to the rich mystical tradition followed by Jesus’s early followers, a Zen-like strand of personal spirituality that would be suppressed around the time of Constantine. Scholars such as Elaine Pagels argue forcefully that the Church’s excision of Thomas not only removed a precious record of early Christian piety, but symbolized the loss of the individual mystical quest, suppressed at the expense of the institutional, liturgical church. Yet laments about the loss of Thomas read strangely when we look at the near-obsessive nature of the Christian mystical quest over the following centuries, whether we are looking in Europe or beyond. At its most ambitious heights, in the East Mediterranean movement known as Hesychasm, believers even tried to achieve deification, transfiguration – union with God.

The history of mainstream Christian mysticism is much different from what is suggested by many recent works, and the reality is much richer, more daring. Across Europe and the Near East, monks and religious practiced forms of mysticism that often recall the world of the ancient Gnostics and other fringe movements, and they did so with the enthusiastic support of the mainstream

church. In the Eastern churches especially, mystics have never ceased to teach the ultimate goal of *theosis*, deification, so that believers can (and should) become gods. They were in fact pursuing an erosion of limits between human and divine of the kind commonly believed to characterize only Asian faiths such as Hinduism and Buddhism. This was especially true in the Eastern churches, which pursued practices, ideas and terminology literally indistinguishable from those of the early Gnostics, and from texts such as the Gospel of Thomas. But the idea of becoming God pervades Western thought too, and surfaces among remarkably humble believers, men and women.

So often in medieval writings, we find ideas that sound purely Gnostic – the inner resurrection, the emphasis on silence and rest, the return to Eden - though they are attached to an orthodox theology and a total loyalty to the teachings and traditions of the churches. If modern readers ever speculate how Christianity might have developed differently had the Gnostics won, they need only look to the well-documented histories and writings of the churches during the well-documented millennium after 350 or so.

7. THE AGE OF REFORMATION

For perhaps 1,500 years or more, any survey of the broad Christian world would include representatives of all these various sects, from Dualists to Free Spirit adepts, Bible Believers and Catholic/Orthodox. But the religious spectrum of modern times appears *less* diverse than that of a thousand years ago – where now, for instance, are the Dualists? The critical era of narrowing of choices, and the destruction of alternative Christianities, comes not in the fourth century but in the early modern period, partly as older sects merged into the newly ascendant Protestantism. This is a significant story, as older sects tried, usually successfully, to accommodate to the new ideology, although some – like the Free Spirit and Familists – would ultimately find themselves condemned just as heartily by Lutherans and Calvinists as they had once been by Catholics.

But Protestants were not the only beneficiaries, as the Muslims who conquered the Near East and South-Eastern Europe absorbed many of the older heretical sects. It was after the conquest of the Balkans that the long-enduring Bogomils and Dualists made a direct transition to Islam, and the influence of their ancient secret societies and clandestine churches can be seen in the Sufi sects that so flourish in these areas.

In short, while Western Europe perhaps experiences a broad diversification of religious ideas during the Reformation, it is in exactly these years that the ancient alternative teachings are finally mopped up and absorbed into, respectively, Protestantism and Islam. And at least one major culprit for the fall of “Many Christianities” is not the Roman Empire, but the Muslim Ottomans. In this sense, the diversity of ancient Christianity finds its modern-day heirs as much in the world of sectarian Islam as of the later Christian churches.

This chapter represents a particularly innovative contribution to the literature.

8. MAINSTREAMS AND FRINGES

The reader will finish *One Spring, Many Rivers* with a general impression that basically everything they have come to believe about “lost Christianities” is flawed, and that in effect, none of the ideas or insights portrayed in a classic book such as Pagels’ *Gnostic Gospels* ever truly fade away. Studying the kaleidoscopic diversity of the Christian experience must also make modern observers think about the nature of the “Christian Core”. When a church is accused of violating core Christian doctrines, or departing from the traditions of historic Christianity, just what is meant by that claim? What is the “core”?

A modern thinker could use the historical record to make a surprisingly strong claim for the ancient origins and continuity of some very radical theological positions indeed, so radical in fact that they would fall outside even quite liberal definitions of Christian orthodoxy. By observing the countless manifestations that Christianity has taken in the many different cultures and societies in which it has flourished, we can see more clearly just what are the cultural accidents that have surrounded the essential message, and begin to glimpse the theological and creedal realities that lie at the heart of the faith.