

*The Gnostic Gospels* after All These Years

Luke Timothy Johnson

The *Gnostic Gospels* was an instant and continuing best-seller, and has exerted significant cultural influence. Without *The Gnostic Gospels*, there would not have been a *DaVinci Code* --- at least not one so fabulously successful. And among the increasing number of people today who affirm, “I am not religious but I am spiritual,” Elaine Pagels has iconic status. This book made Professor Pagels a person of great importance to many people.

The evidence is abundantly displayed in print. In his novel *True North* (2004), Jim Harrison has an Episcopalian priest of latitudinarian tendencies, state, “Anyway, I had to give up on Lawrence Durrell for the time being and return to Elaine Pagels whom I had designated as Saint Pagels, my patron saint who had reinvigorated the Christ who had died in my heart because He had been encrusted to the point of suffocation with heinous doctrine.”

The evidence is also clearly displayed in the shining eyes of three first-year female students of mine at Candler School of Theology at my mere mention that I would be on a panel with Elaine Pagels.

Cultural factors might have contributed to the book’s success and influence. Likewise, the timing of its publication was fortunate. The first synthetic account of “The Gnostic Gospels” roughly coinciding with the appearance of the English translation of the Nag-Hammadi Library was bound to draw attention.

Success is due mainly, though, to the character of the book. But what about this book created such initial success and such enduring influence? Professor Pagels was scarcely the first to propose a conflict-model for early Christian development, as her acknowledgement of Walter Bauer makes plain; nor was she the first to provide a positive reading of Gnosticism --- as she also notes, Adolf von Harnack had long ago designated the Gnostics as the first Christian theologians. Professor Pagels was not the first to observe that power politics as well as doctrine was operative in Christianity’s process of self-definition in the second and third century --- there is plenty of that in Hans Von Campenhausen. As for Gnosticism

as a genuine spiritual impulse that sought transcendence of a deeply corrupted world, Hans Jonas had some years before Pagels made a strong argument to this effect. I am by no means suggesting that Professor Pagels was not aware of such contributions. She responsibly and generously recognizes all these precedents. I am simply making the point that the success and influence of her book is not due to the fact that on every point she advanced something new.

The success and influence of *The Gnostic Gospels* has more to do, I think, with the manner in which the book is written and the impressively concentrated form of its argument. I would like to offer my sense of each, before sharing a few substantive thoughts stimulated by my recent and appreciative re-reading of the book.

*The Gnostic Gospels* establishes a style that is the template for all subsequent popularizations of scholarly discovery, down to and including the James sarcophagus and the Judas Codex. Professor Pagels writes a clear and attractive prose. No scholarly obscurities are left unexplained. The reader is led from point to point with the comforting sense that all options are being considered, and every voice heard. The opening is particularly effective, with its exciting tale of discovery and skullduggery, complete with one-eyed bandits and assassins.

Less visible to the casual reader, but most effective nevertheless, is the mythic structure within which she places her discussion. She brings to light for the reader the unknown story of how ancient texts that had lain in darkness were now being brought to light. Her book, in effect, is a present-day revelation about ancient revelation. For the compositions throw new light on Christian beginnings, and by bringing to light what formerly had been hidden, they make everything about early Christianity look different. They bring out of darkness an original diversity that flourished before the forced imposition of unity (xxii).

Pagels promises that her study of these compositions will enable readers to “gain a startlingly new perspective on the origins of Christianity” (xxxvi). Here is a twofold implication: conflicts of the mid and late second century provide insight into Christian origins, and finding origins means finding essence.

The earliest form of Christianity is essential Christianity. The mythic structure is completed by the suggestion that the discovery of the past might prove normative for the present. “The Nag Hammadi sources, discovered at a time of contemporary social crises concerning sexual roles,” Pagels states (69), “challenge us to reinterpret history --- and to re-evaluate the present situation.”

A style that invites readers into the arcana of scholarship without unnecessary pain, a romantic tale of discovery, a mythic framework that makes readers privy to ancient secrets that also expose ancient plots --- together with the implied invitation to challenge present practice on the basis of ancient but suppressed options; and all this carried off with a scholarly panache quite lacking in later imitation. Pagels was and is a genuine expert in the matters of which she speaks, and within the accessible style of presentation is a genuinely serious program.

The seriousness of her program is found in the single argument that runs through the book from beginning to end. Working with the premise that religious convictions not only express religious experiences (143-145) but also carry with them political programs, she establishes a binary opposition between the compositions found at Nag-Hammadi and the heresiologists. Focusing particularly on the resurrection, monotheism, male and female images for the divine, and martyrdom, she seeks to demonstrate how the convictions expressed by the orthodox party serve the political goals of an institutionally defined church, and how the religious symbols of the Gnostics suggest alternative ways of thinking about body, gender, and authority. The “conflicts in the formation of early Christianity,” she declares in her conclusion, was between two groups, namely, “those restless, inquiring people who marked out a solitary path of self-discovery and the institutional framework that gave to the great majority of people religious sanction and ethical direction for their daily lives” (149).

Her argument is not only compelling, in several respects it is also convincing. One of its strongest features is the way Pagels shows how points of disagreement are not random but are connected through a deep logic concerning the construction of, and appreciation for, the body. Speaking of martyrdom, she notes in her conclusions, “Here again, as we have seen, orthodox tradition implicitly affirms bodily

experience as the central fact of human life” (101). The binary opposition, in short, enables readers to see clearly what might otherwise have been missed: the battle over self-definition was not simply a matter of ideas but a matter of social practices and organization. Speaking of male and female images of the divine, she states, “Our evidence, then, clearly indicates a correlation between religious theory and social practice” (60). This aspect of things represents a real advance beyond Walter Bauer, and suggests the powerful influence of feminism in the development of a richer and more responsible social history of Christianity.

If such a strong binary opposition helps us see things we might otherwise have missed, the very power of the thesis can sometimes serve to cover over areas of weakness. In the remainder of this short response, I touch on three issues, two of them inherent to the project as Pagels conceived and executed it, and the third arising from my own research in second and third century materials.

1. It is appropriate to ask how well the evidence supports the thesis. Here, I think that in this book, as in her later *Beyond Belief*, Pagels the careful reader of texts is a bit in conflict with Pagels the shaper of a strong argument. The chapter called “The Passion of Christ and the Persecution of Christians” --- a topic obviously pertinent to this scholarly consultation on “Cross, Resurrection, and Diversity” --- illustrates two aspects of this question.

First, she sets out the polar opposition: on one side, the orthodox party celebrates the passion of Jesus and advocates martyrdom as a participation or imitation of that passion, while simultaneously condemning heretics for avoiding martyrdom (89); on the other side, she says, “But not all Christians spoke out. Many, at the moment of decision, made the opposite choice. Some considered martyrdom foolish, wasteful of human life, and so, contrary to God’s will” (82). Thus, the binary opposition, based on conceptions of the body and of resurrection. But she then fair-mindedly lays out the evidence from the Nag-Hammadi texts that might speak to this question, and she finds it to be complex, many-sided, and ambiguous. It might be said that, with the exception of the *Testimony of Truth*, the Gnostic texts do not so much reject the notion of martyrdom as express ambivalence toward it and in some cases, give it a

different significance (90-98). As she notes, “their views were astonishingly diverse” (90). The evidence does not seem to support the notion of a head-to-head disagreement between parties.

Second, Professor Pagels suggests in the same chapter that the orthodox view of martyrdom and of Christ’s death as its model prevailed because “persecution gave impetus to the formation of the organized church structure that developed by the end of the second century” (98), through the writing of martyr narratives and letters exchanged among communities. This is a reasonable observation, except that it offers a somewhat confused version of the strong thesis that ideas express and generate politics. Persecution, after all, did not arise because of convictions concerning the passion, but because of proclamation of the exaltation of Christ as Lord; a theology of the passion did not give rise to the desire for martyrdom, but responded to the reality of persecution. The evidence from the side of orthodoxy, furthermore, suggests that the practice of letter-writing and the sharing of narratives of every sort was an instinctive expression of fellowship among communities that did not arise from or have the motive of propagating a specific theology of politics, and only in small part stimulated by being “pressed by their common danger” (99). The lovely and deeply empathic concluding paragraph of this chapter, in which Professor Pagels points out how in orthodoxy, the view of the body was critical to the sense of religious development, itself suggests the limitations of the strong political thesis.

2. The strong argument through binary opposition also tends to obscure a fuller appreciation of each party to the conflict, because the thesis is sustained by attention to those convictions that appear to stand in opposition. On the side of Irenaeus, we gain little sense of his remarkable reading of Paul that established the basic framework for all future literal interpretations, or his equally powerful vision of the recapitulation of all things in Christ, or history as a process of humanity’s education toward the bearing of the divine presence. But equally on the side of the Nag-Hammadi library, Pagels’ discussion in terms of opposing doctrines tends to obscure some of the religiously most fascinating aspects of this literature: its mythological imagination, its embrace of revelation and spiritual ascent, its fascination with glossolalic utterance. No book, to be sure, can do everything. But although it is fair to at least one side of Irenaeus

and Tertullian to read them in terms of their opposition to Gnosticism, I am not convinced that it is fair to the Nag Hammadi literature to read it mainly in terms of opposition to orthodoxy.

3. Finally, it may be pertinent to ask whether the binary opposition between orthodoxy and Gnosticism might have the paradoxical --- and totally unintended --- effect of actually diminishing the evidence for diversity in earliest Christianity. On this point, I can only make a series of short and unsupported observations. I have already noted how Professor Pagels respects the complexity within the Nag Hammadi library. But we can claim at least equal diversity among non-Gnostics.

Many of the opponents of Gnostics --- figures such as Justin, Clement and Origen --- were not bishops and had no real stake in ecclesiastical politics. Clement and Origen, while affirming the common rule of faith, were deeply platonic with respect to the human body, and celebrated Jesus above all as teacher. Martyrdom was extravagantly displayed in the apocryphal Acts of the apostles, and was celebrated by Origen and Justin, but at the same time Justin was deeply suspicious of the sort of miracles dominating the apocryphal Acts. Irenaeus, who was strict about the rule of faith, was tolerant of diversity in liturgical practice. While Irenaeus and Tertullian agreed about Valentinus and Marcion, they certainly did not agree on Montanus. And all the strong and active women of whom we know, whether fictional like Maxilla, Drusiana, and Thecla, or historical, like Felicity and Perpetua, Blandina, Macrina, and Egeria, are found within disruptive movements --- breaking the bonds of households, inhabiting desert places, “becoming male” through martyrdom --- disconnected from the convictions conventionally associated with Gnosticism.

Perhaps the best tribute that can be paid to Professor Pagel’s pioneering and important work is for scholars to take from her argument the need to develop still more refined categories of analysis to better see and properly assess the many aspects of diversity and unity in early Christianity.

