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Review Article

The Secret History of the World

The Gnostic Gospels. By Elaine Pagels. New York: Random House, 1979. Pp. 182. \$10.00.

It is not for me to praise or criticize Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels*. That has been done in virtually every important periodical, general as well as scholarly, since the book's appearance. Instead, my purpose is to describe the book, to demonstrate the connections between its subject matter and a larger view of history, and to hint at some of its unspoken, perhaps unspeakable, implications. It seems to me that one might describe *The Gnostic Gospels* with the terms that Melville applied to *Moby-Dick*, "a wicked book," one "roasted in hellfire". It is a wicked book because, like *Moby-Dick*, if it were to be read properly, it would spell the end for the established order as it exists today. Norman O. Brown writes in *Closing Time*: "I sometimes think I see that civilizations originate in the disclosure of some mystery, some secret; and expand with the progressive publication of their secret; and end in exhaustion when there is no longer any secret, when the mystery has been divulged, that is to say profaned And so there comes a time—I believe we are in such a time—when civilization has to be renewed by the discovery of new mysteries"1

The story of the discovery of this particular mystery is more exciting than any fictional analogue of it could possibly be. In December, 1945, some Arab brothers digging for fertilizer near the town of Nag Hammadi in Egypt found a red earthenware jar nearly a meter high. They hesitated to break it for fear that a djinn might live inside. But on the assumption that the jar was as likely to contain gold, one of the brothers smashed it with his mattock and found that the jar held thirteen papyrus books bound in leather. They took the books home and put them by the oven. Their mother used a number of the pages to start fires, and possibly all of the books would have been burned had it not been for one of those quirks of circumstance which seems almost necessary to impel events such as these to public significance. A few weeks after their discovery, the brothers, who had been involved in a blood feud of long standing, avenged their father's murder by committing a murder of their own; they hacked their assailant with their mat-

tocks, ripped his heart out, and devoured it. Fearing that the police would find and take the books in the course of their investigation, the brothers arranged for one or more of the books to be kept by the local priest. A history teacher saw a book, and word of their existence spread, finally reaching Cairo. Officials of the Egyptian government bought one of the leatherbound volumes and confiscated another ten and a half, depositing them in the Coptic Museum in Cairo. Part of another book was smuggled out of the country and offered for sale; eventually it was bought by the Jung Foundation in Zurich and examined by Professor Gilles Quispel, a distinguished historian of religion from Utrecht. When Professor Quispel discovered that some pages were missing, he flew to Cairo in the spring of 1955 to try to find them. He hurried to the Coptic Museum, borrowed photographs of some of the pages, and took them back to his hotel to translate them. Quispel was startled, then incredulous, when he saw that the first line read: "These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke, and which the twin, Judas Thomas, wrote down."¹¹

Further investigation showed that the books were Coptic translations, made about 1,500 years earlier, of still more ancient manuscripts. Just how old the originals were is hard to say. Quispel and others have suggested circa 140 A.D. as the date of the originals. Recently, however, another scholar has argued that the Nag Hammadi manuscripts contain traditions which date back to 50-100 A.D., meaning that the gnostic gospels may have been written at about the same time as or even earlier than the gospels of the New Testament, which are dated circa 60-110 A.D. The general subject matter of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts is frequently the same as that of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but the details are often strikingly different, even antithetical. One of the texts, *The Gospel of Philip*, reports:

. . . the companion of the [Savior is] Mary Magdalene. [But Christ loved] her more than [all] the disciples, and used to kiss her [often] on her [mouth]. The rest of [the disciples were offended]. . . They said to him, "Why do you love her more than all of us?" The Savior answered and said to them. "Why do I not love you as (I love) her?"
(xv)

The gnostic version of Genesis is told from the viewpoint of the serpent, who represents the principle of divine wisdom, and portrays God as a jealous and threatening being who wants to keep Adam and Eve from attaining knowledge. Another text with an Oriental-sounding title, *The Thunder, Perfect Mind*, is a poem spoken by a female deity:

For I am the first and the last.
I am the honored one and the scorned one.
I am the whore and the holy one.

I am the wife and the virgin. . . .
 I am the barren one,
 and many are her sons. . . .
 I am the silence that is incomprehensible
 I am the utterance of my name. (xvii)

Many of the gnostic texts refer to both the Old and New Testaments, and the *dramatis personae*, principally Jesus and his disciples, are often the same as those of conventional scripture. According to the gnostics, the world is ruled by evil archons, among them the tyrannical Jehovah of the Old Testament, who is distinguished from the supreme being, the ineffable Fore-Father or Abyss. The mission of Jesus is to fan into flame the spark of divinity in everyone, while the archons want to keep humankind in subjugation. This world view leads to marked doctrinal differences between gnostics and mainstream Christians. Pagels notes three main distinctions:

(1) Mainstream Christians (and Jews as well) insist that God is wholly other, whereas some gnostic texts say that the self and the divine are identical, that self-knowledge is knowledge of God. The Jesus of the gnostic texts ridicules the idea of a separate God and a separate Kingdom:

"If those who lead you say to you, 'Look, the Kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds will arrive there before you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' " then, he says, the fish will arrive before you.

But the disciples persist in the belief that God and his Kingdom are distant:

His disciples said to him, "When will . . . the new world come?" He said to them, "What you look forward to has already come, but you do not recognize it." . . . His disciples said to him, "When will the Kingdom come?" [Jesus said,] "It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying 'Here it is' or 'There it is.' Rather, the Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it."

In other words, the Kingdom is a state of transformed consciousness rather than a literal place:

Jesus saw infants being suckled. He said to his disciples, "These infants being suckled are like those who enter the Kingdom." They said to him, "Shall we, then, as children, enter the Kingdom?" Jesus said to them, "When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same . . . then you will enter [the Kingdom]." (129-30)

(2) Whereas the New Testament Jesus speaks of sin and repentance, the gnostic Jesus speaks of illusion and enlightenment, as a Buddhist might, or, as Pagels says, as a modern psychotherapist might. Mainstream Christians see benevolent and malevolent forces as external, while gnostics say that the psyche contains within itself the potential for liberation or destruction. As Jesus says in the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*:

"If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you." (126)

(3) Mainstream Christians believe that Jesus, like God, is distinct from humanity, but the gnostics see him as an enlightened person, a teacher and spiritual master. Again, Pagels refers to the psychotherapeutic model; the disciple accepts the master's authority in order to learn how to outgrow it. The gnostic Jesus says:

"Whoever will drink from my mouth will become as I am, and I myself will become that person, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him."

But just as the disciples could not grasp easily the idea of an internal Kingdom, so they find it hard to accept the notion of their autonomy:

Jesus said to his disciples, "Compare me to someone and tell me whom I am like." Simon Peter said to him, "You are like a righteous angel." Matthew said to him, "You are like a wise philosopher." Thomas said to him, "Master, my mouth is wholly incapable of saying whom you are like." Jesus said, "I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become drunk from the bubbling stream which I have measured out."

And again:

When the disciples, expecting him to reveal secrets to them, ask Jesus, "Who is the one who seeks, [and who is the one who] reveals?" he answers that the one who seeks the truth—the disciple—is also the one who reveals it. Since Matthew persists in asking him questions, Jesus says that he does not know the answer himself, "nor have I heard about it, except from you." (130-31)

The gnostic texts that express these beliefs were only part of numerous other gospels, "secret teachings, myths, and poems attributed to Jesus and his disciples" (xxiii) that circulated among Christians during the first two centuries following Christ's death. But by 200 A.D., Christianity had become a hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons, and the church of Rome began to take a leading role amidst the diversity and proliferation of sects. Nonconformist viewpoints were

dismissed as heresy. The church father Irenaeus insisted that heretics, that is, those who argued for Christian teachings outside the New Testament, be expelled. When the mainstream viewpoint became allied with the military establishment, sometime after Constantine converted to Christianity in the fourth century, heresy became not only an inadvisable but often a fatal enterprise.

Who were the authors of these exotic, paradoxical, sometimes sensuous texts? Gnosticism was a varied and widespread movement deriving from both Jewish and Christian sources; possibly it contained elements of Iranian and Egyptian religions. There may have been influences from farther east: trade routes between the Greco-Roman world and the Far East were opening up during the heyday of gnosticism (80-200 A.D.); Buddhist missionaries were known to have proselytized in Alexandria; and tradition has it that the disciple Thomas, for whom one of the gnostic gospels is named, went to India. It is easy to imagine gnostic tendencies developing among Jews intrigued with the mystical aspects of Hellenistic philosophy and disillusioned with their own heritage. One of the texts, *The Apocryphon of John*, is clearly a reaction against Jewish scriptures in its repeated use of the phrase "and not as Moses said" (Moses was commonly thought to be the author of the first five books of the Old Testament). In fact, it is not difficult to see the gnostic account of the cosmos as an attempt to reconcile the two very different and essentially contradictory halves of the Bible by depicting Jehovah as a malevolent deity and Jesus as his foe rather than his assistant; this interpretation will certainly appeal to readers who cannot credit the relationship between an angry, selfish father and a loving, self-sacrificial son on which traditional Christianity is based. What is clear is that today traditional Christianity is based on a small number of scriptures which were selected from a larger number. The question is, who did the selecting, and why did they choose the texts that now make up what we call the Bible?

One major difference between gnosticism and orthodox Christianity is that gnostics deny the resurrection of Jesus after his crucifixion while orthodox Christians not only insist upon the miraculous reappearance but also make it the central belief of their faith. The importance of the resurrection lies in its necessity for the direct transmission of authority from Jesus to his apostles and from them to the anointed clergy of the Christian hierarchy. What the orthodox are saying to the dissenters, in effect, is this: Jesus came back when you were not here and he put us in charge. Vico speaks of the tendency of rulers to keep the gods to themselves: "The heroes or nobles, by a certain nature of theirs which they believed to be of divine origin, were led to say that the gods belonged to them, and consequently that the auspices of the gods were theirs also. By means of the auspices they kept

within their own orders all the public or private institutions of the heroic cities."³ As a child, I remember reciting the Apostles' Creed, uncomprehending yet happy in the knowledge that I was saying a prayer and thereby pleasing God. A knowledge of early church politics makes it clear that the Apostles' Creed is less a prayer, however, than a pledge of allegiance, not to God but to his self-appointed spokesman.

In a sense, the gnostics got what they asked for. Their claim to an esoteric *gnosis* (Greek "knowledge") superior to that of any other group is sufficient reason to think that many of the gnostics must have been not only doctrinally and politically but also personally unbearable. The title of John Dart's book on gnosticism, *The Laughing Savior*, hints at the theme of mocking laughter that runs throughout the gospels: Eve laughs at the archons who rape her likeness, Jesus laughs at her persecutors as they pound nails into his abandoned physical self. Even the most saintly among us do not care to be mocked, and it is little wonder that the orthodox found ways to silence these scornful heretics. Besides, who would want to replace the New Testament's gentle reason with the gnostic gospels' murkiness and lack of system? ("Every day everyone of them invents something new." complained Irenaeus of the gnostic Valentinus and his followers.⁴) Recent world events suggests that desert religions have no monopoly on virtue. The tragedy is not that gnosticism does not predominate over orthodox Christianity today but that the two cannot coexist in some fruitful way, and one's regret over that loss prompts a consideration of the paradigmatic values of the relationship between gnosticism and mainstream Christianity and the historical lesson that can be learned from that relationship.

Perhaps the most useful thing we can know about history is that it almost never happens the way we are taught that it does.⁵ History is more the work of institutions and social forces than anything else—as Vico said, the social world is the work of men, not of God or major figures, as one learns in school. Vico thought history cyclical; Michelet resurrected this idea a century later and, in the headiness of French revolutionary pride, argued that history was not only cyclical but also progressive. Marx made good on the promise of Vico and Michelet, using Hegel's theory of thesis-antithesis-synthesis as the backbone of his dialectical materialism and arguing that the cycle of history could be broken, that the promise of progress was real. Capitalist or communist, beneficiary (real or imagined) of the American Revolution or the Russian, that is pretty much how we see the world today, as cyclical and progressive. But a more sophisticated outlook will allow that "progress" often involves the victory of one movement over a second movement that does not necessarily merit defeat. Might does not make right; it makes the future. An awareness of how much is lost in the

name of "progress" clarifies our understanding of history, our knowledge of the way the world works. What is imperative is that we no longer accept at face value the reaction of the winners of a given conflict to that conflict, either their commentary on it or their failure to comment at all. Pagels says, "It is the winners who write history—their way" (142), and sometimes theirs is as much a history of omission as it is of commission. There are references to gnosticism in Christian scripture, but it took an accidental discovery and a murder to bring the full story to light. Especially where we see no history should we expect it, just as physicists are said to predicate the existence of certain particles because they must exist, even if their presence cannot be validated. It is this belief in a richer world than the one that is described to us by our limited senses or by the reports of others, a world with a secret history, as it were, that can sustain and perhaps revive a civilization that often seems too stupid to continue. Of necessity, humankind impels itself to order, but ultimately it impels itself past the spirit which gives life and rigidifies within the letter that kills; in this way it brings disorder again, and the cycle continues, complete with intervals of spurious "progress." "Civilizations . . . end in exhaustion when there is no longer any secret." The gods laughed themselves to death, says Nietzsche in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*; "that happened when the most godless word issued from one of the gods themselves—the word: 'There is one god. Thou shalt have no other god before me!'"⁶ But perhaps the other gods are not dead after all. The gnostics would have them in a divine coma, ready to be wakened, chuckling in their sleep.

NOTES

1. Norman O. Brown, *Closing Time* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 30.
2. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. xv. Other page numbers will be given in the text. For a fuller account of gnosticism, I have relied on other sources, including John Dart, *The Laughing Savior: The Discovery and Significance of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), a lay introduction nonetheless useful for its emphasis on the possible Jewish origins of gnosticism and its correction of one's natural tendency to romanticize the gnostics. Those with further interest will want to see the Nag Hammadi texts collected in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) as well as the following: E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian In An Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965); Werner Foerster, ed., *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Tests*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972, 1974); Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, 2nd ed., (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1966); Robert Haardt, *Gnosis: Character and Testimony*, trans. J.F. Hendry (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971); and Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Boston, Beacon Press, 1963).

3. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. T.G. Bergin and M.H. Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 414; quoted in Brown, p. 35.
4. Dart, p. 117.
5. This is one of the main points of Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979).
The commentary that follows on Vico, Michelet, and Marx derives largely from Edmund Wilson, *To The Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1940).
6. Quoted in Dart, p. 134.