



## ELAINE PAGELS

“SO MUCH OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE HAS BEEN THIS BUNCH OF BELIEFS AND YET THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS, ON THE CONTRARY, ASKS YOU TO GO BACK TO YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE AND SAY NOT ‘WHAT YOU BELIEVE’ BUT ‘WHAT YOU KNOW’ EXPERIENTIALLY.”

Reasons for Excluding the Gospel  
of Thomas from the Canon:

*Contains secret teachings*

*Advocates experiential, personal approach to God*

*Antithetical to centralized authority*

*Officially considered heretical*

**I**t takes about thirty-five minutes to read the Gospel of Thomas. It's a slim book filled with sentences no longer than those on the menu of a fine restaurant. Which is not to say that it takes thirty-five minutes to understand the ancient text. Within its pages are some of the most mystifying fragments in the Christian tradition. It begins: "These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke... Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death," followed by, "Jesus said, 'Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over the All.'"

And yet it's astonishing that we even have the choice to be troubled by the Gospel of Thomas. Lost to the literate world sometime around 400 AD, the ancient manuscript only accidentally resurfaced in the Egyptian desert in 1945.

This millennium-and-a-half-long disappearing act was a result of the early Christian Church's decision that the Gospel of Thomas, and all other "Gnostic" gospels, were heretical. Although Thomas was one of Christ's original disciples, the gospel that bears his name was not included with the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—in the New Testament. In fact, all the Gnostic gospels were destroyed at the behest of the bishop of Alexandria. All, it seems, but one copy.

Elaine Pagels, the Harrington Spear Paine Professor of Religion at Princeton University, has spent much of her career not only tracing the history of this remarkable book, but also, especially lately, thinking about what the enigmatic epigrams mean and how they relate to twenty-first-century Christians, herself included.

Her latest book, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (2003) has proven to be the most popular of her

career; it spent more than fifteen weeks on the New York Times best-seller list. Though she self-deprecatingly calls the book “dense,” it is clearly the work of a gifted writer exploring familiar territory. Read enough reviews of Pagels’s books and the word “lucid” appears again and again.

However, the heart of her work is not only lucid prose. It’s scholarship. *Beyond Belief* required eight years of research and writing. And not surprisingly, she has the scholar’s longstanding affinity for her source material. At one point in our conversation she said, “When I first met these texts...”

Professor Pagels is a petite, poised woman with clear blue eyes who speaks in the gentle but firm cadences of an enthusiastic expert. This interview was held in her office at Princeton.

—Rodes Fishburne

THE BELIEVER: The story of the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas sounds like a film script for a John Huston movie. Can you describe it?

ELAINE PAGELS: What happened is that one day in December 1945 some villagers from the small town of Nag Hammadi, in Upper Egypt, were going out to the cliff to dig for birdlime to fertilize the crops. Muhammad Ali al-Samman hit something underground with his spade and as he dug down he found a six foot jar with a corpse buried next to it. He was afraid to break open the jar because he thought there might be a jinn...

BLVR: A genie?

EP: Right. This is the land of Arabian nights, after all. But then he thought that it might be buried treasure so he smashed it open and realized to his disappointment that it was filled with ancient papyrus. He took it home and threw it on the ground near the stove and later his mother said that she used some of the papyrus to start a fire to make some bread.

Not too long after his discovery, Muhammad Ali al-Samman was arrested for murder because he had killed the man who had killed his father in a blood feud. He and his brothers were waiting for the man, attacked him, actually cut him open, and ate his heart. It was blood revenge.

BLVR: Literally.

EP: They knew the police would be coming to take them to prison, so they decided to hide the books because having illegal antiquities was another crime. So Muhammad asked a local history teacher to take care of them while he was away. It turns out the history teacher took them to Cairo to see what he could sell them for on the black market. They were seen there by a French archaeologist who realized one of them was the Gospel of Thomas. There were many other secret gospels as well, over fifty in that bunch.

BLVR: In your profession in the 1940s, did people know that there were texts like this out there waiting to be discovered?

EP: We knew there had been a lot of other Gospels because we had the names: there is the Gospel of the Egyptians, the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Thomas, but nobody was thinking that we were going to find them.

BLVR: Why were these secret gospels buried in the desert?

EP: The reason that the Gospels were found in that jar in the first place was that the archbishop of Alexandria told the monks [in 367 AD] to get rid of all the illegitimate secret books they liked, and keep twenty-seven of them. That’s the first list we have of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament, which include the four gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And all these others were supposed to be burned...

BLVR: I don’t know if it’s unusual, or just a sign of human nature, but the authorship of the Gospels still continues to inspire artists, political debate, and religious quarrels nearly 2000 years later. I recently saw a production of *Waiting for Godot* in which Vladimir speaks of the Gospels and bemoans that everybody believes them because “it’s the only version they know.” And in the *New Yorker* recently, a profile of Mel Gibson’s new movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, revealed that the film turns, almost entirely, on what the Gospels really said.

EP: Well it's curious. I heard about a new three-hour feature film on the Gospel of John that's coming this spring. And it really concerned me because I thought the culture wars are heating up, and they're heating up over the Gospels. If you're Mel Gibson you can say, "this is the story as it reads, and it's clear that the Jews were guilty for the death of Jesus," a crime of deicide from his point of view. And people who look at this and analyze this and ask questions, like I do, are accused of putting a politically correct spin on it, when in fact, the spin is already in the story, as it was told in the first century.

BLVR: But that's the great insight you bring forth in your book, that Jesus didn't write these Gospels...

EP: Right, and neither did God. What I realized when I was writing my book *The Origin of Satan*, and it was a total surprise, was that these Gospels are wartime literature. They were written right after this horrendous war by people who were aware of that war and what it meant and so they tell that story in particular ways that work politically for the survivors of that war, who want to exempt themselves from the charge of being seditious, like Jesus, and want to portray the Romans as being incredibly fair-minded magistrates. It's fascinating to try to sort out what really happened from the religious propaganda. And I don't mean that pejoratively, I mean that descriptively.

BLVR: One of the things you do in your current book is to show that while the early Christian leaders may have excluded some of the hundreds of gospels circulating at the time, such as the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, they did so because they were under intense pressure to survive.

EP: When I wrote *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979), I realized I was enthusiastic for the underdog and against the hierarchy of the Church, and it was just my culture. It was very American and feminist and it made sense at the time it was written. But this time I wanted to try and write more empathetically about everybody on all sides. The leader of the early Church, Irenaeus, was thinking what the American revolutionary was thinking, "We

have to all come together or we will surely all hang separately," and that was a realistic perception.

BLVR: Do you think Irenaeus would have said of the Gospel of Thomas, sort of like a Hollywood producer, "I like it, I like it, but we can't..."

EP: We can't afford it.

BLVR: Afford in the sense that the Gospel of Thomas is too self-directed?

EP: Yes, I think so. And evidence? Yes we have five volumes of Irenaeus's writings. I think he thought, "We can't bother with all that. We can just take the elementary material and forget the rest." And besides, he was really concerned with authority. He couldn't tolerate people going off and coming up with their own texts. He had to come up with the texts, the four gospels that validate group authority. And I think that they do that very well.



Kimmy T. in London Club

BLVR: What relevance does the Gospel of Thomas have for us now?

EP: First, what interests me is that it really gives a different picture of early Christianity from what we call Christianity. It shows us that there were many things that were left out of the Christian tradition as we know it. Because, this one [Gospel of Thomas] particularly looks like a very early text; some people think this is the earliest text that we have.

BLVR: Because it's supposed to have been written fifty years after Christ died?

EP: More like twenty or thirty years. And was maybe even known before the narrative gospels that we have in the New Testament... but we don't know for sure.

BLVR: We can get into a historical conversation about which Gospel came first, or we can get into a conversation about how the Gospels differ from one another, but that seems to obscure the real point, which is: do these Gnostic gospels paint a different portrait of Jesus?

EP: I don't think that they do, but they paint a fairly different *kind* of picture... It wouldn't make sense to read the Gospel of Thomas if you didn't know who Jesus was. So the "secret sayings" of Christ assume you know the public teachings. You've heard about the public Jesus of Nazareth—he was a teacher, a healer, he taught things publicly, he was executed, he was alive after he died, and then these texts make sense. So why not assume that it's likely that early Christians knew the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Thomas and put them all together and didn't see them as necessarily antithetical. What interests me is that some people decided they were antithetical and that only four of the gospels were considered real.

BLVR: Don't you imagine that Thomas's message, that we all have a divine light within us and that our relationship with God can be self-directed, wasn't terribly popular around the collection plate circa 80 AD? I mean, you can't build a church around that!

EP: No, not unless you already have a Church. This text is for advanced students. It's for the *monakhos*, which means the "single one"; the word "monk" comes from this. You're right, it isn't a very corporate message. But if you have a community and there are advanced students who want to be more radical, to give away everything and follow Jesus, those are the people who are going to follow these messages.

BLVR: Does your book provide a way out of the modern Christian church because it shows how the early gospels were censored? Or does it provide a way back in for people who have become disenchanted with the rigid orthodoxy of the Christian church by showing them another way into Jesus' philosophy?

EP: It depends on the person. It could do any of the above.

BLVR: It strikes me that the gift of your book is that it's not a polemic: you're not saying the Christian church is deeply flawed, or should be abandoned.

EP: I'm just trying to find out what happened.



*Kid from The Shining*

BLVR: What has the reaction been from people as you go on book tours and speak?

EP: Mostly there's been an enormous excitement about the kind of message you find in these texts; people say, "I always knew there must be something like this," or "This really spoke to me, really spoke to my experience." Because so much of Christian doctrine has been this bunch of beliefs and yet the Gospel of Thomas, on the contrary, asks you to go back to your own experience and say not "what you believe" but "what you *know*" experientially. And I think that's what many people understand as a fundamental question about religion, but one that very often Christians don't ask, or are not supposed to ask.

BLVR: Because?

EP: Because it's often understood to be a set of answers to a set of questions.

BLVR: But isn't it also because it's so dangerous?

EP: What do you mean?

BLVR: Well, you say that "The Gospel of Thomas" taps into our own knowingness about our relationship with divinity, so if the Christian Church were to ask its flock what your "knowingness" about your relationship with divinity is, it leaves them wide open for people to say my knowingness is not in alignment with what I'm being taught.

EP: Well, exactly. I was very struck by the story of Milarepa, this eleventh-century Buddhist monk, in which his guru tells him to sit up in the cave and drink green nettle-broth tea and he sits there and he drinks nettle-broth tea and turns green and finally the guru comes to him and says, "What have you learned?" And I love that because he's asking him what he's learned from within...

BLVR: Not, "what do you believe?"

EP: Right, and that's a completely different approach than most Christian churches. If you bring a thirteen-year-old to be confirmed, they ask: "Do you believe in Jesus the son of God, the Father Almighty, the Holy Church," and the person will say, "I do, I do, I do." Because if they say, "I don't," or "I'm not sure," or "Are you sure it's all about belief anyway?" it doesn't work.

On the other hand, if you take someone of the same age to a Bar Mitzvah the person is given the Torah portion and reads the Torah portion and comments on it and says, "This is what I understand... this is what I question." That is inviting the person to reflect on tradition. Often, Christian rituals have been about "these are the answers you have to give me if you want to join the Church."

BLVR: Does the success of your book surprise you? I don't mean to suggest that the book doesn't deserve it, but it seems to be tapping into something else.

EP: It is a surprise. Other people have said, "Wasn't *The Gnostic Gospels* on the best-seller list?" and the answer is no. *The Gnostic Gospels* was a successful book, but it's been more like a cult movie, not a big, popular book. I was surprised to read in the *New York Times* last week that *Beyond Belief* has become part of popular culture. And it certainly surprised the publisher because the book is rather dense. And yet the book is tapping into something. What do you think it is?

BLVR: My suspicion is that right now people are disenchanted with what organizations are telling them, whether it's government, business, or religion. In the last five years we've seen major scandals in all these areas.

EP: Yes, disenchantment with the authority. We have to take responsibility for the authority we have. That word, authority, comes from the Greek word *autours*, which means "self." Basically one has to go back and verify for oneself what authority one is going to accept. I was brought up to think that religion was unnecessary, archaic, old thinking, bad science—who needs it? And I guess we see pretty clearly that it's not going away.

BLVR: Why is it that it's taken fifty years for the Gospel of Thomas to penetrate popular culture? It seems to me that if you'd said to me, "Next week we're going to find these ancient manuscripts in the desert that contain the advanced teachings of Jesus," I would have thought it would take a couple of years for that to be big news. Not fifty years.

EP: Well yes, but there are two problems. It's written in Coptic, and it wasn't even published until 1959. More importantly, the perception was that this was a Gnostic text, a heretical text, and a bizarre mythological text, and even now this perception is very deep. When I first wrote about them I called them the "Gnostic gospels," meaning, all right, they are heresy, let's look at that. But now, I don't call them that anymore. I thought, this is just a gospel. A gospel very much like the others.

BLVR: And now we know the story about how the gospels were put together. So we don't have to say "this is good" and "this is bad" and we can recognize the selection process, and we don't have to exclude the things that didn't get selected.

EP: And we don't say, "This is heretical." But it took me a long time to get a sense of what the teaching really is—reading through this in Coptic, and reading through all the preconceptions. It's taken me twenty years to figure out something of what this text is really about.

BLVR: And what have you figured out?

EP: That it has to do with a reading of Genesis, a kind of mystical reading of Genesis. That it is connected with, I think, Kabbalistic teachings, even though Kabbalah wouldn't be invented for a thousand years. That it's based on this conviction about humans created in the image of God and that image's being a metaphor for divine energy and divine light. You know, *that!* And nobody has written that before... I haven't seen it.

BLVR: What would the Pope say about the Gospel of Thomas if he were sitting here today?

EP: [*Laughs*] I think he would say what Irenaeus said, "We don't need that. The world is desperate for the Gospels. We need the Gospels of Jesus Christ that will save souls and forgive sins and deal with guilt and war and conflict and all the serious problems of the world. We don't need to go off and find our own truth. That's too idiosyncratic. It's a very dubious endeavor because after all, humans are basically inclined to sin and they will, left to their own devices, come up with something megalomaniacal and convince themselves that they are really God." I mean that's how they parody these sorts of things.

BLVR: And these sorts of parodies have some validity?

EP: There's some truth in that characterization. Madness and delusion can be part of religious conviction. When you read the Gospel of Thomas you see two things; one is that a lot of the sayings are identical to those in Matthew and Luke, such as "Love thy brother" or "Blessed are the poor for yours is the kingdom of God," so you know that these are early teachings attributed to Jesus. Other material, the enigmatic ones, such as "Recognize what is before your eyes and the mysteries will be revealed to you"—that kind of teaching is said to be



*Getting Wax out of Ears*

a “secret teaching.” And Mark says that Jesus had secret teachings but claims to give it to you, though he never says he gives you all of it. The Gospel of John says if we wrote down everything that Jesus said the world couldn’t contain all the books.

BLVR: Savvy writer.

EP: And so the claim that there were secret teachings comes from multiple sources.

BLVR: What does the line “Recognize what is before your eyes and the mysteries will be revealed to you” mean to you?

EP: It means that you have within yourself a capacity to discover the mysteries. You don’t need a guru, you don’t need the Church. You don’t need anyone else as a final authority.

BLVR: Does it suggest also that heaven may be in front of us?

EP: Perhaps, or just that you can have access to God and understand the meaning of the mystery by just keeping your eyes open. The capacity of perception is given to us.

BLVR: I like the line you mention in your book from one of the gospels, “Follow me to heaven and I hope you shall surpass me there.”

EP: It’s from the Secret Book of James.

BLVR: That’s James, as in Jesus’ brother. Jesus spoke of being surpassed in ways that only very wise teachers ever do, which is to wish that their students do better than they do.

EP: Yes.

BLVR: That isn’t in keeping with what the Church would be comfortable with, is it?

EP: Right. Because it also allows, from the point of view of Church leaders, far too much license for anybody to go plunging off the cliff.

BLVR: What clergy wants to hear the faithful insisting they’ve just surpassed Jesus?

EP: [*Laughing*] Right.

BLVR: Given what we know about human nature, can we be surprised by the confusion that has followed the Gospels over the last two thousand years? One of the things your book does is depict human nature at work.

EP: Jesus must have been a remarkable, charismatic teacher, and he said a lot of different things to different people. And different people heard him differently. Some thought that he was going to set up a kingdom right then—there are many things that were heard.

BLVR: I was surprised when I read in the 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.” I had the sense that I already understood that principle.

EP: Of course, because you had experienced that before. It’s speaking to your experience. If you aren’t aware of your experience or you don’t know your experience, it doesn’t speak to you. You go, “What?”

BLVR: Now are you being politically correct? What do you mean by “experience”? What’s a synonym for “experience”?

EP: Well I can’t give you a verbal synonym. It’s what you said earlier about something that spoke to you... I can’t think of any other word than experience.... So when there’s a crisis of authority, and we don’t have to talk about the Catholic Church and the sex scandal, but in any institution, government, law, in any of these authorities, we’re thrown back to say, “Wait a minute. What are we going to trust?” ★