

BOOKS

quirement of clarity is the choice of the exact word," these conditions are rather hard to reconcile with Barnard's line of argument. He himself deplores the confusing of such words as "disinterested" and "uninterested," "infer" and "imply," "faunt" and "flout," and apparently the incredible confusing of "incredible" and "incredulous." But, sub specie aeternitatis, he refuses to grieve over such manifestations of the march of mind: "the first word loses its original meaning and appropriates the meaning of the second, which then passes out of use." Others may grieve for the loss of essential distinctions and impoverishment of the language.

However, I must commend this book to all people who have a real concern with language and relish a forceful argument which—at the opposite pole from Mitchell's in every way—likewise invites or compels readers to take sides on both principles and cases.

Natural Selection

THE GNOSTIC GOSPELS. *By Elaine Pagels. Random House. \$10.*

Reviewed by BRIAN HAYES

Christianity is a literary religion, grounded not merely in the Word but in the Book. It has a canon of texts; the most important texts tell a story; the central (or crucial) elements of the faith can all be traced to themes and incidents of the story. Whatever happened in Jerusalem circa A.D. 30, Christianity did not begin there and then. It began some decades later, primarily in hellenized communities around the eastern basin of the Mediterranean, with the composition or compilation of the Pauline epistles and the gospels. The production of anachronistic accounts of the life and the teachings of Jesus remained a thriving industry for another hundred years. Whether this literature was read as history or pseudo history, it was the fundamental source of belief because it was the only source. The founders of the church had nothing else to go on, nor do we.

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Interpretation and reinterpretation of the primary texts commenced immediately. As Frank Kermode has recently pointed out, every gospel can be read as a gloss on its predecessors. The early exegetes lacked the philological power tools of modern biblical scholarship, but they were hardly credulous or unsophisticated readers. There is nothing primitive in their ideas. Theirs was the great age of midrash, and even those who were not trained in the tradition of rabbinic Judaism must have been influenced by it. Theirs was also an age of parable, or riddle; dark saying seems to have been more common than plain speaking. The framers of Christian theology were well acquainted with the principle that meaning must be brought to a text or else teased out of it.

The various sects grouped under the label of Gnosticism were among the most intrepid of the early interpreters. Perhaps the one definitive characteristic shared by all the Gnostic groups was a belief that texts can have a deep or a hidden meaning, often a meaning deliberately concealed from outsiders. The Greek *gnosis* evidently meant more to them than simple knowledge; Elaine Pagels suggests translating it as "insight." Thus *gnosis* is knowledge that cannot be gathered at the surface; it must be brought up from below.

Apart from this single connecting thread, Gnosticism embraced a great diversity of doctrines. Some of the groups were not Christian sects at all but had affiliations with Judaism, with Middle Platonism, with the cult of Hermes Trismegistus, or with Zoroastrianism. Even within overtly Christian Gnosticism there was considerable variation. Professor Pagels does not attempt a rigorous definition of the term, but she cites a few organizing ideas toward which most Gnostics tended. Fundamental among them is the notion that "the kingdom of God is within you." That slogan, of course, is to be found in the canonical scriptures, but until recently the churches have not been comfortable with it. The Gnostics were also inclined to view Jesus not as a redeemer but as a spiritual guide, one who "speaks of illusion and enlightenment, not of sin and repentance." A third characteristic belief is that Jesus was not uniquely divine. However one chooses to construe "divine," it describes an attribute shared by at

least some subset of humanity. In particular, anyone who attains enlightenment or *gnosis* becomes "no longer a Christian, but a Christ." In addition to these matters of belief, the Gnostics were distinguished by their mode of religious practice, which emphasized a severe asceticism. Celibacy was expected as a matter of course, and complete withdrawal from society was sometimes recommended.

For many years the doctrines of the Gnostics were known almost exclusively through tracts written in condemnation of them—the most important source being the works of Irenaeus, who was bishop of Lyons about A.D. 180. That is not the ideal way to reconstruct a system of thought, but of the Gnostic literature itself only a few fragments seemed to have survived. The disappearance of the Gnostic literature is not hard to explain. By the time of Irenaeus, Gnosticism had already been branded a heresy, and the Roman church worked diligently to suppress it. After the conversion of Constantine, the church militant had the power of the state behind it, and the suppression became highly efficient. In a literary religion, the most effective way to extinguish nonconforming ideas is by burning books.

In 1945 a great jugful of Gnostic documents was unearthed near Nag Hammadi, a town on the Nile about 300 miles upriver from Cairo. The story of the discovery involves an Arab farmer engaged in a blood feud, a black-market dealer in antiquities, a smuggler, a one-eyed bandit, and other colorful characters. The political, bureaucratic, and scholarly bickering over the right to publish the manuscripts was even worse than in the case of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were found two years later but were made available to the public much sooner.

The find consists of twelve codices of papyrus bound in leather and a few pages from a thirteenth codex. Included are fifty-two works or fragments of works, of which forty were previously unknown except through citations in Irenaeus and similar sources. All the manuscripts are in Coptic (a language derived from the demotic form of Egyptian but written in Greek letters) and were apparently translated or copied in the fourth century. The source documents were Greek, most of

them having been dated to the second or third centuries. It is conjectured that these books made up the library of a monastic fraternity with Gnostic tendencies. They were presumably buried when the enforcers of orthodoxy appeared on the horizon.

The publication of the Nag Hammadi documents is at last nearing completion, with a facsimile edition and an eleven-volume series of transcriptions and translations. Three years ago a one-volume collection of English translations was issued. There have been at least two popularizing accounts, and the scholarly bibliography now amounts to some four thousand entries. Still, the content and import of the texts are not widely known, and the book by Elaine Pagels should dispel some of that obscurity. Pagels learned Coptic while a student at Harvard, in order to work on the Nag Hammadi find; she is now head of the department of religion at Barnard College.

Professor Pagels is no more a naive or a gullible reader than the Gnostics were, and what she offers here is not a mere exposition on the texts but an interpretation of them. She is concerned mainly with the relation between the Gnostic movement and the Christian orthodoxy. In that context, she presents a thesis on how the social and political positions of the two groups influenced the development of their ideas.

Mystery may well be an indispensable ingredient of all religions, but Christianity seems to have a real appetite for big ideas that are hard to swallow: the Incarnation, the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, the Trinity, transubstantiation. Indeed, it seems the Roman branch of the church has sometimes gone out of its way to find impossible things which the faithful are asked to believe before breakfast. Gnosticism was by no means more rational, but it is interesting to note that it differed from orthodox doctrine in just those matters that now seem hardest to fathom. Then, as now, the sticking points were the same.

The idea of the Resurrection has long been the very heart of the faith. Since the second century the church has insisted on a single reading of it: Jesus really died, and he rose again, in the flesh, on the third day; at the last judgment, but not before, so will everyone else. Metaphorical and allegorical inter-

pretations have been adamantly excluded. The Gnostic view was quite different. Belief in a literal resurrection was the "faith of fools"; the Resurrection "was not a unique event in the past: instead, it symbolized how Christ's presence could be experienced in the present." The experience was to come through visions, which are not tricks of the mind but divinely inspired (or even divinely engineered) revelations. "The Treatise on Resurrection," one of the documents found at Nag Hammadi, explains: "Do not think the resurrection is an illusion. It is no illusion, but it is truth. Indeed, it is more fitting to say that the world is an illusion, rather than the resurrection. . . . It is the truth which stands firm. It is the revelation of what is, and the transformation of things, and a transition into newness. . . . Already you have the resurrection. . . . Why not consider yourself as risen and [already] brought to this?" This constitutes what they call in the trade a "realized eschatology." (Parts of the above passage are given by Professor Pagels in a different translation. I am quoting from *The Nag Hammadi Library*, edited by James M. Robinson; Harper & Row, 1977.)

I suspect that many Christians today find this "transition into newness" a more congenial interpretation of the gospels than the image of a bleeding man who casts off his shroud and walks. The church of the third and fourth centuries, however, opposed it vehemently. Why did the orthodox churchmen find it necessary to take such a hard line?

Professor Pagels suggests a possible explanation. The bishop of Rome ruled the church, then and now, as vicar of Christ, that is, as his vicarious representative. This authority was based on the delegation of power to Peter by the resurrected Jesus. "Feed my sheep," Jesus told him, and according to tradition Peter ministered to the flocks of Rome, then passed the mantle to the next bishop in line, thereby founding the apostolic succession. If the Resurrection was historical and of the flesh, then the bishops' franchise was irrevocable and immune to all counterclaims. If the Resurrection was no more than a vision, however, or even a metaphor, then ecclesiastical authority could have no secure foundation. Anyone can have a vision. Indeed, the danger to the hierarchy becomes



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plain in one of the later Gnostic texts, which offers a variant account of the last conversation between Peter and the risen Christ. Jesus describes the rise of the bishops, but he complains that they are "waterless canals" who "do not understand mystery."

Another point of contention between the Gnostics and the orthodoxy was the physical nature of Jesus and the meaning of the Crucifixion. The Roman church insisted on having it both ways: Christ was at once fully human and fully divine. His suffering on the cross was real and was necessary if the sacrifice was to redeem humanity from sin. For the Gnostics, on the other hand, what impeded human progress toward God was not sin but ignorance, and so what was demanded of Jesus was not expiatory sacrifice but wise teaching. As a result, his divinity was emphasized at some cost to his humanity, and a rather different account of the Passion emerges. In one Gnostic text the flesh is crucified but the "real" and presumably disembodied Jesus is seen laughing above the cross. The most intriguing version of the story turns the Crucifixion into a farce of mistaken identity. It was not Jesus who was executed but Simon the Cyrene, the enigmatic figure who, in the three synoptic gospels (but not in John), shoulders the cross on the way to Golgotha. Jesus stood by "laughing at their ignorance."

Professor Pagels sees in these disparate views the doctrinal reflection of a controversy over the church's attitude toward martyrdom. During the persecution of the Christians, the faithful were counseled to accept death without protest, as Jesus had. Irenaeus spoke of martyrs as those who "strive to follow in the footsteps of the Lord's passion." That imitation of Christ would not make sense if Christ did not suffer as people suffer, and did not even die. And the Gnostics do seem notably less eager to make the ultimate act of faith. One of the Nag Hammadi tracts dismisses martyrdom contemptuously, as the easy way out. If salvation were so simple, "the whole world would endure this thing [and] would be saved." The author notes that God does not demand human sacrifice.

One can well imagine that a certain bitterness might arise between those who confess their faith and are led off to the lion pit and those who weasel out of the obligation. Ter-

tullian of Carthage, another apologist for the orthodoxy, leveled against the Gnostics an explicit charge of breaking ranks. In Professor Pagels's paraphrase, Tertullian "traces the rise of heresy directly to the outbreak of persecution. This, he says, impelled terrified believers to look for theological means to justify their cowardice."

Professor Pagels applies the same method of social and political analysis to other doctrines that distinguished the Gnostic sects. Thus a Gnostic tendency toward dualism in theology reflects not only affinity for Greek and Persian thought (which has been well documented), but also opposition to Roman thought. The Roman position she summarizes in the slogan "One God, one bishop"; the assorted deities and demiurges of the Gnostics comported with a more pluralistic organization of the church.

The place of women in the church reveals a similar connection between doctrine and practice. In the Roman church their place was at the rear. The Gnostics, on the other hand, apparently encouraged female participation in the sacraments and may have ordained at least a few women. In Catholic theology the only woman of any significance is Mary the Virgin, and her cult is quite recent. Professor Pagels points out that even today she is not God the Mother but merely the Mother of God; she began as little more than the divine birth canal. Gnostic theology and cosmogony were much richer in female figures. Sophia, a representation of wisdom, repeatedly chastises the egotistical male God of Israel. In the revelation poem "Thunder, Perfect Mind," the "revealer" is a woman, or perhaps an androgynous figure, who announces, "I am the whore and the holy one / I am the wife and the virgin." Another revelation has a female redeemer, called Protennoia or Barbelo, who is identified as "the First Thought of the Father." Among the New Testament Marys, the Gnostics are drawn most strongly to Mary Magdalene, who is made an intimate of Jesus, privy even to secrets that were kept from the disciples.

On the whole, the interpretive method Professor Pagels applies to these texts seems reasonable and appropriate. There can be no question that power struggles in the early

church had an influence on the formulation of doctrine, and they may even have been the predominant influence. In exploring these relations, she is led to a number of illuminating observations. Still, they are only observations, and they cannot be made to stand on their own as explanations of church history.

For example, the notion that there may be some relation between monistic theology and the episcopacy is appealing, but any attempt to establish a causal connection leaves the argument vulnerable to counterexamples. No people were ever more staunchly monotheistic than the Hebrews, and yet Judaism did not develop an autocratic church. Doctrinal disputes within Judaism have not led to the burning of books, much less to the burning of people. Similarly, the association of the Gnostics' theories of the Crucifixion with their resistance to martyrdom seems rather tenuous. Gnosticism arose before the persecution of Christians began in earnest. What is more to the point, Gnosticism continued to attract adherents even after the Roman church had taken upon itself the role of persecutor, and the Gnostics were among the main targets.

Professor Pagels points out that when the canon of the New Testament was defined, at the end of the second century or the beginning of the third, many of the Gnostic works had already been written. She asks how it came about that one small body of texts received the blessing of the church and all others were outlawed as heresy. Christianity might have turned another way, perhaps toward Gnosticism, or else it might simply have continued to tolerate a greater diversity of thought. The answer Professor Pagels suggests follows from her entire analysis of sectarian relations; the freezing out of all doctrinal systems but one can best be accounted for by examining the needs and ambitions of the church fathers.

I cannot refute this conclusion—after all, it is only to be expected that the bishops would keep their own interests in mind when compiling their syllabus—but it may be possible to supplement it. Some of the Gnostic works may have been candidates for inclusion in the New Testament anthology; indeed they may have been rejected on doctrinal grounds, for propagating ideas considered dangerous to

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the church institutional. Doctrine aside, however, there are other reasons for excluding the Gnostic texts, reasons of form and texture and structure. Five of the tractates found at Nag Hammadi, for example, call themselves "gospels," but they are clearly works of another kind entirely from the four canonical gospels. Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John are first of all narratives; they tell the story of Christ. Their genre is biography, whatever else may be imposed upon them. Nowhere in the Nag Hammadi manuscripts is such an account of the life of Jesus to be found. If there is a formula for a typical Gnostic text, it is that of a dialogue between one of the apostles and the risen Christ; the events preceding the Resurrection are assumed to be known. Jesus appears, not as the engaging protagonist of a story but as a mere mouthpiece for ideas. Such doctrinaire stuff could not compete on an equal footing with the gospel narratives.

Professor Pagels has been reading this literature for a decade and knows these distinctions well. Her concluding remarks point to another connection between doctrine and the organization of the church, a more fundamental connection. She quotes Helmut Koester: "The test of orthodoxy is whether it is able to build a *church* rather than a club or a school or a sect, or merely a series of concerned religious individuals." That is a test Gnosticism could never have met; it was too intellectual, too exclusive, too severely ascetic, too little of this world. One imagines that the Gnostics themselves must have grown weary of so much intensity and introspection. At times their works read like the pamphlets of some self-actualization movement in southern California.

Thus Professor Pagels is led to formulate a principle that might be called "the origin of religion by means of natural selection." The orthodox doctrine overcame all its challengers, not because it offered better or truer doctrines but because it was associated with the stronger institution. Had Gnosticism prevailed in the second century, Christianity itself might not have survived. "For ideas alone do not make a religion powerful, although it cannot succeed without them; equally important are social and political structures that identify and unite people into a common affiliation."

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