

31. Pagels, Elaine, *The Gnostic Gospels* (Random House 1979)

Of all the books in this list I think my two favorites are Daniélou and this one, by Pagels. I simply love the way she draws from the writings of the Gnostics to illustrate their beliefs. She made me think I am a Gnostic at heart. This is no doubt the reason Jenkins disparages this book (see item # 22), and why Freke and Gandy love it. The things I did like very much about Freke and Gandy's book, in fact, is where they wrote in this same style to illustrate a more spiritual way of being, based on Hermetic and Gnostic writings. It is similar in content and style to Pagels's book, or at least Freke and Gandy referred to her enough and wrote enough like her to cause me to again look into this Pagels book.

But I am not going to do what I am tempted to do and reproduce lots of spiritual thoughts and ideas here from Pagels' book, with reference to Gnostic spirituality. I need to stay focused on the relationship between the Gnostics and the Christians. Did the Gnostics originate as a movement within Christianity?

Pagels cites scholars on all sides of this issue in her introduction: this is a side-issue for her. I make a simple summary here of what Pagels discussed on pages xxix through xxxiii with plentiful references. The list below indicated there are/were scholars who believed that Gnosticism:

- is its own tradition, pre-Christian, and not an offshoot of Christianity
- originated in Greek philosophy
- began as a Christian heresy
- were the first Christian theologians, but distorted

- Christianity with Hellenistic concepts
- was derived from Iranian religion, influenced by Zoroastrianism
 - resulted from the alienation in people deprived of their religious traditions in the Roman Empire who sought the promise of an eventual salvation out of a miserable existence
 - was an accepted part of Christianity in some locales, later declared heretical as Christianity developed notions of authority and orthodoxy
 - was a late Jewish heresy
 - is so eclectic that searching for roots is a useless exercise
 - was a reaction to the destruction of Jerusalem on the part of both Jews and Christians
 - was a reflection of the attempt to explain mystical experiences.

In other words, scholars have various ideas regarding the origin of Gnosticism, and there is no consensus.

Whatever the ultimate roots of Gnosticism, however, Pagels makes no bones about her own view that declaring the Gnostics heretics had political as well as religious utility. This fact, she says, gives startling new insights into Christian origins (see page xxxvi).

The first chapter (pages 3 through 27) of Pagels's book illustrates this startling new insight by exploring the resurrection, literal in the orthodox view and spiritualized in the Gnostic view, as the key to the need to declare the Gnostics heretics. The literal resurrection allowed the closing of a chapter, wherein Jesus taught the Twelve before and after his death and resurrection. Once that chapter was closed, the Bishops and priests became the authorized messengers of Christ, carrying on the apostolic mission.

Gnostics said that Christ's resurrection was a spiritual awakening that can happen to any of us while alive. In addition, and more obviously a threat to the notion of a central church authority and priesthood, Gnostics claimed that anyone who experienced (or claimed to have experienced?) a vision or other revelation from the spiritual being, the eternal Christ, was equal to the apostles of old. This, of course, allowed for no authority or hierarchy to have any clout: every individual could be or become a prophet. Intermediaries between God and human beings were unnecessary.

Pagels uses the *Gospel of Mary* (see item # 25) to illustrate her point: Mary is the Gnostic who has had a vision of Christ and is teaching new doctrine. Andrew and Peter are the orthodox apostles who accuse her of making up these strange ideas she claims to have obtained in open vision, from Christ. Levi defends her. (Pages 12-14) On page 15 she makes the point made by Nibley, as well as by Smith and others (see Smith, item # 33), that there was a secret tradition with hidden teachings in early Christianity. The Gnostics claimed to be connected, in spirit, to the source of these teachings. Plus, they were aware of the secret traditions and teachings of the early Church, the ones transmitted by Christ to the apostles during that 40-day post-resurrection ministry. In fact, they were the designated recipients and keepers of these mysteries. The orthodox were blind, the Gnostics had sight.

What do I think of these arguments? I think they are correct to a point. But in some sense I think they are overstated because the physical resurrection was not necessarily a reason to think there could be no new revelation. Over the succeeding ages, Christians also had their visions and revelations, despite the physical resurrection. Saint Francis, several Catholic mystics, and the prophets of Mormonism all

claimed revelation in the context of a physically resurrected Christ. But other than that, the general characterization is OK: the Gnostics were or at least claimed to be the revelators, their leaders were undeniably charismatic. The Christians generally did not claim revelation, but many of its leaders were also quite charismatic.

In her second chapter, Pagels enters into the difference between the Gnostics and Christians over the God of the Old Testament. Generally that God was seen as a tyrant or lesser deity with real problems: he is blind, impious, jealous, boastful, etc. But there is another, good God. This is discussed on pages 28 and 29. On page 30 Pagels makes the point that the serpent and Eve were seen in a positive light. The serpent spoke truth, the creator did not. Eve was the spiritual principle that enlivened Adam.

On pages 31 through 47 Pagels writes about the split between the followers of Valentinus and the orthodox church. The Valentinians declared there to be but one God, the root or ground of all being. They were Christians and some of them could not understand why the other Christians turned on them and declared them heretics. Their notion of God was heretical, perhaps, since their God was a God beyond God the creator, and he is the God Jesus called Father, from whom he derived his being. But there was insubordination on the part of Valentinus and his followers. They objected to the centralization of spiritual authority in those who saw God in a very specific, if not literal, way and claimed that they held exclusive authority in matters of defining faith.

Here and only here do I see a parallel with the claims of Freke and Gandy. The Valentinian Gnostics were early Christians. They believed in a God that would be quite acceptable today among certain Christian sects. For example, the Mormon theologian and apostle B.H. Roberts

spoke of a Divine nature that filled all, and that perfected humans became Divine Beings, and would eventually become the One God Made of Many. He used an obscure saying from Joseph Smith, first Prophet of Mormondom, who suggested that a greater God emanated a lesser God, Christ, and also lesser beings, angels and humans, and all were destined to become as God is, to become God. Valentinus would be proud! But Valentinus lived around the year 140! His followers were not the first Christians by any stretch of the imagination. They are several generations into Christianity before Valentinus was even born. So, Freke and Gandy's sweeping statement about Gnostics being the first Christians is not supported in the authority they cite the most on this subject.

If you have not read this book, do it.