

Reflections Upon reading
***Beyond Belief, The Secret Gospel of
Thomas***

**Elaine Pagels (Random House, New York,
2003)**

This review is at the boundaries of part I and Part II for a reason: I had a hard time deciding which section it should go into. It is not by a Mormon or about Mormonism. In fact it asks questions exactly on the mark for part I. On the other hand it answer quite directly for me why I think what is recommended in item 1 of Part II is a poor idea. So, it is a good transition from the one part to the other.

In my review of Grant Palmer's book (#1 of part II below) I noted that Palmer would have Mormonism crawl toward a more normative Christian mode of being. With that idea I disagreed at the end of that review. Why? I'll tell you:

Why create just another mainstream Christian religion? To me it seemed Palmer was unaware of what historians have been able to piece together about the earliest days of Christianity. It seems to me that Joseph Smith's religious fabrications may be fruitfully compared with those of the early Christian latecomer Paul. Paul never knew Jesus in the flesh but claimed revelation and on that authority modified existing beliefs and basically created a new religious tradition.

Same with Joseph Smith. Paul's religion became known as Christianity. Joseph Smith's uncanny combination of daring and gut instinct created a religion that almost convinces me that it moved a few steps back into history before the time of Paul.

Mormonism recreates some essential aspects of what was Christianity, but not yet so called, prior to Paul. Some of the reviews under Part II below point this out. This is no mean feat. Does this mean I believe Mormonism's claims are true after all of my protestations to the contrary? No, it means that I think that Mormonism has as much a claim to genuineness as any other variant of Christianity, even Christianity itself, or any religion based on revelation for that matter.

I combed through several dozen books late last year and early this year to reconstruct and modernize my views of early Christianity. I am of the opinion that, like Mormonism, it grew over time into something that it was not in its very beginning. After completing that very arduous book-reviewing task, strictly for my own enlightenment although it is all posted on this website, I ran into a new book by Elaine Pagels called *Beyond Belief*.

I resisted *Beyond Belief* for months, because I thought I was done with that topic, and was very familiar with the topic of its subtitle, *The Secret Gospel of Thomas*. But after reading Palmer's confessions of an insider regarding the earliest days of Mormonism not having been what they are claimed to have been, I finally decided to buy and read it.

Lo and behold, it gave me an easy set of quotes to use to illustrate the above point about Mormonism being as good a religious tradition as any (but having no basis for claiming

exclusive truth, Palmer was right on that point). It also dovetailed nicely with another book I was reading about the same time by Chet Raymo on a possible way to reconcile science and religion because both authors went from a state of juvenile belief to a state of unbelief that is maturing into a hybrid state, essentially, which values the mystical experience and what it teaches. But that is a topic in and of itself, I hinted at it in my Raymo book review, and don't want to go there right now.

So, what could Pagels possibly have said that makes me think more kindly of Mormonism as a genuine religion with as much claim on its adherents as any other Christian religion (or any other religion, period)?

She cites recent historical work that suggests that early Christianity was modified by Paul, spread like wildfire because of the characteristics of its community, and lost part of its soul in attempting to create a monolithic church and belief structure.

Wow! That in capsule form is what happened in Mormonism too. Joseph Smith modified the current version of Christianity and created a new society that, in my opinion, flourished because of the nature of that society, a cooperative society just like was created by the early Christians inspired by Paul. Then it underwent some internal and external struggles, including persecutions (not on a scale endured by early Christians of course), made some accommodations and came out successful and spreading like wildfire.

In the Mormon case the external accommodation was the cessation of polygamy (a good thing) and the giving up of a radical communitarian society as a practical goal (a mixed

good/not-so-good thing). But an internal accommodation was also made, over time, comparable to the one described by Pagels for the Christian church. That accommodation was the limitation of personal revelation, and the standardization of a common core of belief (and myth). In the general Christian case, the expectation of personal revelation was suppressed more severely than in Mormonism where it is still encouraged, but even there cautions are applied. The Mormon way of dealing with personal revelation is a happy medium if one wishes to keep an organization intact: encourage it, but also govern it, so it does not disrupt the institution. See my last review in Part II for a discussion of this very important issue.

Pagels touched me was in her personal observation that, knowing these things, she is no longer a believer. But when she sets aside what she knows, and immerses herself in that community and its worship she feels the spirit and it warms her and comforts her (see her pages 143-145). In other words, the spiritual experience is still there, it is genuine, despite the foibles and errors and even the violent things done in its history.

That is my observation concerning Mormonism too. I am not a believer, but I am a witness to the power of that faith in the lives of its adherents, and to the goodness of the society that has been created by those persons here and now. A power that exists almost in spite of the history that is thought to underlie it, but really doesn't according to Palmer, showing that history to be a background context to a society that is experienced by its adherents and, thus, is real.

And to me that is the key point. We think we need direction from God and instruction from those inspired by God in order to create whole selves, strong and supportive families, and

societies that are helpful rather than competitive. The good news is that that supporting structure was not what we thought it was. It was not external to us. Its use manipulated us into calling into play powers that always did and always will lie within us. Those powers are real. The goodness in the cooperative, nurturing societies created under these faiths lies in the hearts of its members, it is in their nature, which is human nature!

So, why on earth would I want to save Mormonism? Pagels helped me figure this out by describing the type of heterodoxy extant in Christianity prior to the formulation, and enforcement, of one right-thinking (that is what Pagels says the word orthodox means) religion. The reason Mormonism created a unique and enviable culture and spread like a wild fire in its early years is the same as the reason Christianity spread like a wildfire through pagan societies diametrically and cruelly opposed to it. Members and converts were liberated and empowered by the realization they too, could and would receive personal revelation and thus be validated by God!

That idea of being a revelator, and feeling the Divine in your heart and bone marrow, is powerful stuff, not easily either controlled or discouraged by those who do not see personal revelation quite the same way. That is the story Pagels tells concerning the first few hundred years of Christianity until the brakes were slammed on and personal revelation was officially at least discouraged if not outright forbidden.

To trace these ideas through Pagels' book exhaustively is a sizable undertaking, but I'll do a minimal job of it.

In Pagels's chapter on "Gospels in Conflict: John and

Thomas" she contrasts the core messages of these two gospels as being very different (page 68):

Thoms's Jesus directs each disciple to discover the light within ("within a person of light there is light"); but John's Jesus declares instead that "I am the light of the world" and that "whosoever does not come to me walks in darkness." In Thomas, Jesus reveals to the disciples that "you are from the kingdom, and to it you shall return" and teaches them to say for themselves that "we come from the light"; but John's Jesus speaks as the only one who comes "from above" and so has rightful priority over everyone else: "*You are from below; I am from above The one who comes from above is above all.*"

Where Pagels is going with this is that the followers of Thomas would feel empowered, coming from the light themselves as Jesus. The followers of John would feel totally dependent on Jesus to bring them into the light.

In her next chapter she brings this into a contrast between identification with God (as in Eastern religions) and having a relationship with God (page 73). On page 76 she explains that the branch of belief that saw themselves in relation to God as described in John eventually pushed aside those who felt as Thomas did, that they, like Jesus, were "'children of God.'"

I'll next pick up this theme, slightly changed in the meantime, on pages 87 to 89 where Pagels describes the problems of fractionation being experienced by Irenaeus of Lyon: claimants to revelation, clinging to the teachings of the Thomas school of thought, were creating factions in his bishopric, and he had to do something about it. He could not argue against revelation, knowing the Christian movement was based on it and having

claimed revelation for himself. To conflicting doctrinal claims based on alleged revelation, however, he could react by defining right belief, by which one could then judge revelation.

On page 89 Pagels suggests that in his time the same arguments were being had between believers as are being heard today regarding the continuance of revelation, and if there is still revelation, how do you judge between conflicting claims based on revelation? Gaius in Rome said revelation had stopped with the end of the age of the apostles (p. 90) but Irenaeus was not willing to go that far. His response to the many prophets around him was to try to answer the question (Pagels, p. 92):

"How," he asked, "can we tell the difference between the word of God and mere human words?"

Irenaeus attacked some he thought to be charlatans or worse. Pagels discusses some examples and focuses on one in particular, a Marcus, and his teachings. On page 95 she explains he was focused on Genesis 1, and spoke of the creation and what happened before the creation. Marcus believed in a pre-existent process of creation that was caused by God's emanation of letters that formed words that divided and will in the end return to wholeness. Interesting and conformable to the views expressed in secret gospels popular among the seekers of Irenaeus' time. His remedy? Curtail the flood of secret writings and focus on the accepted canon (which was not yet, but would soon be, a canon). His admirer Athanasius ordered the destruction of these unapproved materials, and the disobedient monks at Nag Hammadi instead buried them in the desert, and as a consequence Pagels has an interesting job (I am up to page 97 now).

One thing to be found in these books, now damned, was a call to "the vision of God" (page 100) and instructions on how to succeed in obtaining revelation (page 101). Pagels spends several pages on the advice given in these works on discerning the spirits to be able to tell the Divine from other sources of revelation, suggesting to me that even within the new prophesy movement as Pagels labels it there is the recognition that uncontrolled personal revelation can lead to discord and disagreement.

Pagels (pages 103-105) uses the Gospel of Mary Magdalene to illustrate this conflict between those who thought in orthodox terms and those who were instructed by visions to see new things and thus revise what was previously accepted as true.

Pagels devotes a chapter to "The Canon of Truth and the Triumph of John" in which she describes the successful effort to have John stand as an accepted gospel and not Thomas and writings similar to it such as The Gospel of Truth which talks of a God transcending gender who is likened to both a Father and Mother, and which speaks of God breathing forth the universe and then gathering it all back into himself. Those "“who discover God in themselves, and themselves in God”" are mentioned on page 121.

On her page 125 Pagels mentions the Acts of John as addressing the phenomenon of Jesus being seen in various ways by various people, the book says that, in pagels's words: "what anyone can see depends on that person's expectations and capacity." Profounder words are seldom spoken.

Next I was taken by Pagels' discussion of the Gospel of Phillip, one of my favorites, and its description of baptism as an initiatory ordinance, and of additional ordinances to be

bestowed after the believer reached maturity in his or her belief. Pagels illustrates the non-materialistic nature of the Gospel of Phillip belief system by citing its belief that neither the virgin birth nor the physical resurrection were to be understood as one time physical events. They illustrate spiritual realities to be experienced by all, and the Gospel of Phillip in essence suggests there is a shallow, superficial Christianity as well as an esoteric Christianity.

Irenaeus took this bull by the horns and instructed his people in what gospels to believe and how to believe even these to assure right-belief or, as it later became known, orthodoxy. I have moved all the way to page 142 and have ignored very interesting descriptions of ordinances that followed baptism in the gnostic sects. Ordinances, or rituals, that led to deeper and deeper initiation into the mysteries of godliness and were thrown over by the new orthodoxy as wrong and superfluous. Of course this all reminds me of the furor over the Mormon institution of ordinances that build on the baptismal foundation and that are absolute requirements to prepare to re-enter the presence of God from whence we came. Those who liken Mormonism to the sects Irenaeus was fighting are not far off the mark.

Pagels next moves on to the role of Constantine in further defining and setting in place orthodoxy. Though his is fascinating, it is the few insights into the nature of spirituality she inserts into this discussion I am focusing on. On page 143 she observes that:

Many Christians today . . . may ask the same question Irenaeus asked: If spiritual understanding may arise from human experience, doesn't it mean that it is nothing but human invention—and therefore false?

According to Irenaeus, it is heresy to assume that human experience is analogous to divine reality, and to infer that each one of us, by exploring our own experience, may discover intimations of truths about God.

She duly quotes Irenaeus to show he indeed asked such a question and answered it. He recognized that his answer was in contradiction to the message of the secret gospels that were everywhere in circulation, hence his need to get rid of these subversive to his orthodoxy) writings (page 147). Pagels next explains how Irenaeus's successors made the first few words of John into a simple formula that became a creed later (page 151) and still stands as a definition of orthodox understanding of the equality of the words God, Word, and Jesus Christ.

It is on page 154 that Pagels explains that orthodoxy is straight thinking, and page 155 where she cites Irenaeus' assertion that obedience to priests is a mark of orthodoxy. All the while, like an undercurrent, Pagels keeps showing how such statements are reactions to Valentinian (largely) teachings which were deceiving many seemingly faithful and circumspect believers (page 157). Pagels next moves on to the next great heresy fighter, Tertullian, and then on to Constantine who (page 174) believed everyone should be Christian, but there was room for friendly disagreement on theology in Christianity. When he died, and his sons reigned, the fighting between Athanasius and Arius and their followers erupted into a war that led eventually to the splitting of the Empire and the church.

Pagels brings this up in part to explain why, perhaps, in Egypt when Athanasius' order to destroy unauthorized writings, that order was disobeyed. It isn't quite that straightforward on her pages 175 to 177, where it is explained but that Athanasius was

in jail while a rival held his bishopric and it was this that caused him upon release to make the Egyptians mind him. But the entire conflict is based on the split between the Arians and the Athanasians. The latter won.

Where I do want to cite Pagels is on page 177 where she notes that Athanasius was aware of the even the orthodox gospels being misinterpreted, and advised against intuitive reading and said only the literal meaning is to be taken as the intended meaning. After describing heretical readings of scripture as being a problem to Athanasius she observes:

To prevent such readings, he [Athanasius] insists that anyone who reads the scriptures must do so through *dianoia*—the capacity to discern the *meaning* or *intention* implicit in each text. Above all, he warns believers to shun *epinoia*. What others revere as spiritual intuition Athanasius declares is a deceptive, all-too-human capacity to think subjectively, according to one's preconceptions. *Epinoia* leads only to error—a view that the 'catholic church' endorsed then and holds to this day.

The heretical idea of humans being able to emulate Christ was attacked by Athanasius (page 178) and in her closing statements in this fascinating book she mentions this again (pages 181-182):

This research offers new ways to relate to religious tradition. Orthodox doctrines of God—Jewish, Christian, Muslim—tend to emphasize the separation between what was divine and what is human: in the words of the scholar of religion Rudolph Otto, God is "wholly other" than humankind. Since those who accept such views often assume that divine revelation is diametrically opposed to

human perception, they often rule out what mystically inclined jews and Christians [and I would add Muslims] have always done—seeking to discern spiritual truth experienced as revelation, truth that may come from intuition, reflection, or creative imagination.

Pagels goes on to discuss those who oppose such experiences leading to relevant or useful insights and who see themselves as guardians of orthodoxy. They do not squelch the religious imagination altogether but channel it to be seen as acceptable only when it confirms what is already known and accepted. Pagels last two pages (184 and 185) describe the complexity of what has gone before. One cannot, given the well-known capacity for human self-delusion, see the institutional control of what is acceptable in personal revelation as always evil. Tradition does give purpose and comfort to many who do not feel compelled to seek.

Pagels makes a very personal observation at the very end of her book about life forcing us to seek our own path at some point. When that happens it is nice to know that other have gone there before us, trusting Jesus's promise to "‘seek and you shall find.’"

That is a deliberately poor paraphrasing of pagels' last few pages, but the point is that the book itself is a very worthwhile read. And her observations deserve to be read in the primary source, her own book.

Of course as I read this book I was thinking of the revelations that define ultimate truth, and Pagels clearly does not recognize anything she has read as illuminating capital-T Truth unambiguously. She does see many examples of people seeking and finding answers that satisfied them, however.

Finally, as I read this book I thought of my advice to keep Mormonism from becoming just another orthodox Christian religion. Early Mormonism was an exciting cauldron of ideas developed without fear of what orthodox Christianity had predetermined on such ideas, and developed beliefs and practices not seen since the imposition of orthodoxy in the fourth century. Except for the idea of polygamy, it should be more definitively jettisoned, in my opinion, because I see it as a mistake stemming from a very literal reading of the Old Testament mixed with desire (Irenaeus and Athanasius were not entirely wrong).

So, what has Mormonism that normative Christianity lacks? The same thing the Valentinian Gnostics had until orthodoxy pushed them out of history: a tradition of personal revelation with some controls, a tradition of extending salvation far and wide in terms of time and space, and a tradition of additional ordinances that led to a deeper understanding and prepared recipients to meet God, who is considered to be of the same species as humanity.