

Pagels again digs into the origins of gospels

Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas. Elaine Pagels. Random House. \$24.95. 241 pp.

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By Page 1 she has already brought us smack into the heart of the mysteries. Best-selling author Elaine Pagels, in her new book *Beyond Belief*, writes of a long ago morning when she slipped into a church after learning her small son was dying. "Here is a family," she thought, surprised by the realization, "that knows how to face death."

A professor of Early Christianity at Princeton University, Pagels has become something of a phenomenon. Over the course of her writing — *Beyond Belief* is her fourth book — she has examined many of the underpinnings of our western culture. Pagels has studied everything from the origin of the idea of evil, to the role of the body vis-à-vis redemption, to the endemic anti-Semitism of Christian teachings. Not only has she teased apart what most of us have assumed were givens about the essence of Christianity, her work has taken on just about every issue that defines God, east or west.

Pagels is quick to describe herself as a historian rather than a theologian. She says she's not so much interested in God as how people have understood their relationship with God. Yet there is an urgency to both her questions and the quality of her scholarship that suggest that this work is far more than academic discipline. Perhaps it's this urgency — its lack of sentimentality, too — that explains the ferocious popularity of Pagels and what is far from simple reading.

Beyond Belief picks up where Pagels' earlier groundbreaking work, *The Gnostic Gospels*, left off. Not only does she look again at the competing visions of Christ and human nature of the earliest gospels, Pagels herself comes out of the shadow. She finally tells her readers how it was she ever started this work. After losing a friend as a teen — after hearing that her friend, who was a Jew, would not be 'saved' — Pagels decided she would learn Greek in order to read what the original gospels actually said about salvation. One thing led to another until years later, as a doctoral candidate at Harvard, Pagels was introduced quite literally to buried treasure. Archaeologists were discovering missing writings, the so-called Gnostic gospels, referred to as heresy and ordered destroyed by fledgling church officials as early as the second century AD.

As Pagels details in *Be-*

yond Belief, the God of these scriptures is not wholly other. Neither then is the Christ. In *The Secret Book of John*, Eve as helpmate becomes a metaphor for the gift of *epinoia*, a virtually untranslatable Greek word having to do with intuition that lets us glimpse Spirit. According to the Gospel of Thomas, when *epinoia* comes into play, Jesus becomes twin rather than savior. Likewise in *The Secret Book*, the story of the Fall becomes an ironic commentary about those capable of seeing God only as a jealous Big Daddy. The Jesus of these scriptures talks of enlightenment and illusion, not sin and repentance. "In the Round Dance of the Cross Jesus says that he suffers in order to reveal the nature of human suffering and to teach the paradox that the Buddha also taught: that those who become aware of suffering simultaneously find release from it."

At one point Pagels cuts away from her texts. She is attending a Christmas Eve service with her teenage daughter and describes what could surely be called an experience of *epinoia*. There was the darkness and then candles, the

solemnity, then the waves of joy even amid the intimations of death. She writes that she was shocked to realize that each of us "could have made all this up out of what had happened in our own lives, but of course we didn't have to do that, for countless other people already have."

Returning to her historical narrative, Pagels states that by the time the Emperor Constantine had made Christianity the official faith of the realm and sought to codify it (325AD), perhaps as many as half of the churches in the empire participated in gnosticism. She postulates that the Gospel of John, the gospel of spiritual loss and thunderous revelation that over the centuries has become synonymous with Christianity, was written in large part to debunk this idea of Christ as mystical twin.

In vintage Pagels style, *Beyond Belief* takes its readers through the web of arguments and ambitions, personalities and political expediencies that brought us to our now. Historian that she is, she does not judge the players. She does, however, allow herself to reflect that by cutting itself off from the richness of its own traditions, orthodoxy impoverishes both the church as institution and those who have found no room for themselves there.

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