

Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting  
Easter Sunday April 4, 2010

## If the Gnostics Had Prevailed . . .

by Donne Hayden

*In Gethsemane,  
. . . he assembled us all, and said, "Before I am delivered to them, let us sing a hymn  
to the Father, and so go to meet what lies before (us)." So he told us to form a circle, holding  
one another's hands, and himself stood in the middle . . .  
"Answer Amen to me," [he said] and began to intone a mystical chant:  
"To the Universe belongs the dancer."  
Amen  
"He who does not dance does not know what happens."  
Amen  
"Now if you follow my dance, see yourself in Me who am speaking . . .  
You who dance, consider what I do, for yours is  
this passion of Man which I am to suffer. For you could by no means have understood  
what you suffer  
unless to you as Logos I had been sent by the Father . . .  
Learn how to suffer and you shall be able not to suffer."  
—The Acts of John (a Gnostic document)*

I've been reading through *The Other Bible* which contains various early Christian writings that are not in the New Testament, i.e., *non-canonical* writings. It occurred to me to wonder what would we be doing today if the Gnostic understanding of Jesus had prevailed instead of the Augustinian view? Would Easter even exist as a holiday? How would we talk about the events of that day 2000 years ago? What meaning would we assign to that event if we were Gnostics? (And actually, the more I read, the more I began to suspect some of us might be Gnostic.)

Some of you may have read Elaine Pagels' book, *The Gnostic Gospels*, first published in 1979. In it, she describes the discovery at Nag Hammadi in Egypt of thirteen papyrus books bound in leather. These books, called "codices," were eventually identified as Coptic

translations of 52 Gnostic texts that had been ordered destroyed by orthodox Christian authorities almost 2000 years ago. Apparently, some heretic disobeyed, and the codices were hidden in clay jars in caves in the desert and remained undiscovered until 1945 when an Arab peasant found them in a cave near the village of Nag Hammadi.<sup>1</sup>

All the documents were texts from a Gnostic sect. In the first two hundred years after the death of Jesus, dozens (perhaps hundreds) of Christian sects followed their particular understanding or interpretation of what Jesus' teachings meant, of what his death meant, of what the stories about his reappearance meant. The Gnostics were early Christians who had a completely different understanding of the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ from what we know today as Christianity, which descends from another group of early Christians that Pagels calls "Ecclesiastical Christians."<sup>2</sup> This is in reference to their emphasis on "ecclesia" or church structure. For them, Jesus, his message, and death, was intertwined with the growth of the Church (with a capital "C"). This group gained dominance and power, in part perhaps because they sought it. And because Gnostics challenged earthly "authority," they were among the first to be targeted for elimination by Ecclesiastical Christians when they gained dominance.

Some background. The earliest followers of the Way, which is what the first Christians called themselves, met in people's homes, and these gatherings were called "*ecclesia*" in Greek. Communication being what it was in those days—i.e., mostly oral, and mostly slow to travel from one group to another—the different Christian sects remained individualistic. Eventually, of

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Press, 1989), p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Pagels, p xvi.

course, over time certain personalities asserted themselves, like Ignatius of Antioch, one of the early “Church Fathers,” who can be credited with identifying Christianity *as the Church*.

Ignatius and other early church authorities (and that is a key word—*authority*) claimed that God wanted Christian gatherings or churches to reflect the same hierarchy that existed in heaven. In heaven, as everyone knew, God the Trinity (who was, however, only ONE God) was at the top of the hierarchy, and then the 9 orders of angels. According to St. Dionysius the Aeropagite, (airy-op'-a-gite) “who wrote down what the Apostle Paul told him about his third vision of heaven,” the hierarchy of angels include first the seraphim, then cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels, and finally the angels. Just under the angels came man, then woman, then child, slave, mammal, fish, etc. Like heaven, which had only one God, Bishop Ignatius said, the Church should also have just one “head,” and that would be the *bishop* (from the word “*episcopos*” which means “overseer”), then priests, then deacons, then the laity with men, of course, above women or children or slaves. Ignatius declared that, “As there is only one God in heaven . . . so there can be only one bishop in a church. ‘One God, one bishop’ . . . became the orthodox slogan” of the Ecclesiastical Christians<sup>3</sup>. Just *above* the bishops were the Apostles, and the earliest bishops were supposedly anointed or appointed by one of the apostles. Ignatius, for instance, according to tradition, was one of the children Jesus picked up and blessed, and he was appointed the 3<sup>rd</sup> bishop of Antioch by none other than Peter himself. So he claimed a great deal of authority—as direct a line to Jesus, and thence to God, as one could have in so many decades after the death of Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> Pagels, p. 33.

It sounds very suspicious to us now, but perhaps Ignatius had only the best intentions when he said that because the bishop “presides in the place of God” in the church hierarchy, the laity should revere, honor and obey him “as if he were God.”<sup>4</sup> Elaine Pagels explains Ignatius as simply a man of his time, unable to conceive of politics/power and religion as separate; they never had been separate; why would they be now? Ignatius believed, according to Pagels, “that God became accessible to humanity through the church—and specifically, through the bishops, priests, and deacons who administer it: ‘without these,’ [Ignatius wrote] ‘there is nothing which can be called a church!’”<sup>5</sup> That kind of thinking and that kind of structure attracted people interested in power and authority. The situation was dramatically emphasized when, under Constantine, Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. “It is the winners who write history—their way,” says Pagels.

*“No wonder, then, that the viewpoint of the successful majority has dominated all traditional accounts of the origin of Christianity. Ecclesiastical Christians first defined the terms (naming themselves “orthodox” and their opponents “heretics”); then they proceeded to demonstrate—at least to their own satisfaction—that their triumph was historically inevitable, or, in religious terms, “guided by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup>*

Because the Ecclesiastical Christians prevailed and they defined what was orthodox or acceptable, Easter is a holy day built around the crucifixion; the focus is on the bodily death and bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the cross is a dominant symbol. Gnostics had a different understanding of Jesus entirely. First, they understood the resurrection event as an appearance

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

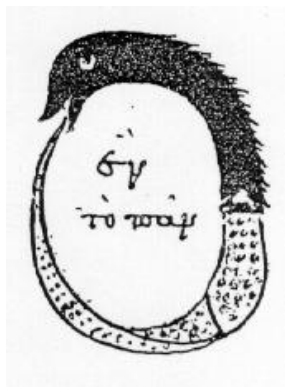
<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

of Jesus in the spirit—very real, they insisted, but nonetheless, a different sort of body altogether than his physical body. Remnants of Gnostic thought can be found in the canonical New Testament in the letters of Paul. For instance, in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, we find Paul describing the “resurrection body” to his followers:

*But someone may ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?” How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. . . . So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.*

Compare the traditional symbol of Christianity, the cross, to the figure below, the *ouroboros* (derived from the Greek for “one who consumes its own tail”), a Gnostic symbol reproduced from a 3<sup>rd</sup> century manuscript. The *ouroboros* is a feathered serpent, half-dark, half-white; it seems to twist like a Mobius strip, and it completes itself, i.e. eating its own tail. This figure appeared throughout the ancient world; in classical Greek culture, the *ouroboros* was a guardian of the temples of Athena, goddess of wisdom. For Gnostics, this feathered serpent enclosed in a circle was a symbol of *gnosis*, or knowledge or wisdom, especially the secret knowledge Jesus taught for how to find and live in the Kingdom of God here and now.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>7</sup> Brother Matthew, “The Ouroboros: A Gnostic Sacred Symbol,” *The Apostolic Gnostic Church in America* (AGCA) website.

Notice the Gnostic symbol is essentially circular, while the cross is rectangular or, in its earliest form, square. In *Man and His Symbols*, psychologist Carl Jung tells us that “the circle is a symbol of the psyche” while “the square (and often the rectangle) is a symbol of earthbound matter, of the body and reality.”<sup>8</sup> And in this, we see one of the most particular differences between traditional Ecclesiastical Christian understanding of the Easter story and a Gnostic understanding: the *traditional* Christian interpretation asserts that the actual *physical body* of Jesus re-activated and left the tomb. Gnostics, on the other hand, insisted from the beginning that what people experienced after the death of Jesus was a spiritual event, an encounter with the *spiritual essence* of their teacher. (I suspect many people today may be more in-tune with the Gnostic understanding without knowing that it is heresy in Ecclesiastical Christianity.) Clearly the feathered serpent is a much different symbol from the Cross used by the Ecclesiastical Christians.

Gnostics rejected the claim by the Ecclesiastical faction that Jesus re-appeared after his death in his very body, flesh and blood, exactly the same one that died on the cross was the body. In fact, Gnostics called “the literal view of resurrection the ‘faith of fools.’”

Here is how Elaine Pagels explains it:

*The resurrection, they insisted, was not a unique event in the past: instead, it symbolized how Christ’s presence could be experienced in the present. What mattered was not literal seeing, but spiritual vision. They point out that many who witnessed the events of Jesus’ life remained blind to their meaning. The disciples themselves often*

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<sup>8</sup>Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1968), p. 284.

*misunderstood what Jesus said: those who announced their dead master had come back physically to life mistook a spiritual truth for an actual event.*<sup>9</sup>

Everything that descended from ecclesiastical Christianity—the Catholic Church, and most Protestant Churches—inherited these beliefs and the hierarchical system that puts someone up front as the Minister and other people up front as worship and ritual leaders, and the rest of the people in the congregation. (One group we know rejected that system.) The Ecclesiastical tradition asserted that only a few had authority (via the Apostles) and most did not. But the Gnostics believed, Friends, that *anyone* could gain spiritual authority, that *anyone* had access to God, that *anyone* could become enlightened, could learn the mystery of the secret teachings of Jesus. And in contrast to the Ecclesiastical Church which insisted women be quiet and subservient at all times, Gnostics extended their notion of spiritual equality to women (Sounds like Quakers to me.)

Valentinus, a well-known Gnostic writer of the time, explains that Gnostics “join together as equals, enjoying mutual love, spontaneously helping one another.”<sup>10</sup> Valentinus was critical of the Ecclesiasticals who, he said, ““wanted to command one another, outrivalling one another in their empty ambition””; they are inflated with a ‘lust for power,’ ‘each one imaging that he is superior to the others.’”<sup>11</sup>

For a long time, until the Nag Hammadi texts were discovered and translated, all we knew about the Gnostics was what their critics said about them. One such critic was Irenaeus, an early “Church father,” who despised the Gnostics. In his description of how Gnostics

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<sup>9</sup> Pagels, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Pagels, p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp. 38-39.

conducted their meetings, you can hear his sarcasm when he refers to them as these “spirit-filled” people;

*. . . when they met, all the members first participated in drawing lots. Whoever received a certain lot apparently was designated to take the role of priest; another was to offer the sacrament, as bishop; another would read the Scriptures for worship, and others would address the group as a prophet, offering extemporaneous spiritual instruction. The next time the group met, they would throw lots again so that the person taking each role changed continually.*<sup>12</sup>

Irenaeus was outraged by this challenge to Ecclesiastical authority.

So how would Easter be different if the Gnostics had prevailed? It might not even exist as a holiday, but if it did, Christians would worship on this Sunday with completely different symbols surrounding them. Instead of the cross, for instance, Christian gatherings might be identified by the *ouroboros* on the door or elsewhere.

If Gnostic tradition had prevailed, its adherents might come together on Easter Sunday and draw lots to see who would be the preacher that day, who would be the worship leader, etc., and it would be a different person each week. We might have a service that looks a lot like an unprogrammed Quaker meeting.

If the Gnostics had prevailed, people might celebrate by re-enacting the dance described in the Acts of John that is in your bulletin today. We might form a circle, holding one another’s hands, with someone in the middle representing Christ, and do a responsive sort of

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

chant, "To the Universe belongs the dancer."—Amen. "He who does not dance does not know what happens." —Amen. "Now if you follow my dance, see yourself in Me who am speaking . . ."