

Charlie Rose Show Transcripts

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DISCUSSION ABOUT THE MEANING OF EASTER; A  
CONVERSATION WITH PETER GELB, THE GENERAL MANAGER  
OF THE METROPOLITAN OPERA - PART 1

BYLINE: Charlie Rose

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CHARLIE ROSE, HOST: Welcome to the broadcast. We begin tonight with a special conversation for Good Friday. The reverend Dr. James Alexander Forbes Jr., former senior minister of the Riverside Church in New York, talks about the meaning of Easter. (BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR., SENIOR MINISTER, RIVERSIDE CHURCH: You've got a kind of debate about the ultimate issues of life. Which way is it, darkness, light, death, life, love, hate? Which has the last word? What a dramatic presentation. You almost look at the cross and say, oh, death won out, hate won out.

CHARLIE ROSE: Suffering.

REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: Suffering won out. CHARLIE ROSE: Yeah. REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: But Easter, in juxtaposition to it, says, oh, you thought these other, more destructive elements have won out, but alas, we now see that life and love have the last word. (END VIDEO CLIP)

CHARLIE ROSE: We continue with Elaine Pagels and Karen King, author of "Reading Judas". (BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

ELAINE PAGELS, AUTHOR: We know that Judas handed him over, and according to this gospel, there's a mystery in that and there is - there are things that Judas understood that the others didn't. CHARLIE ROSE: But we're also -- we are - we're hearing here that Judas said Jesus told him and only him stuff.

ELAINE PAGELS: That's right. CHARLIE ROSE: What was that stuff?

KAREN KING, HARVARD UNIVERSITY: You know, that stuff he calls "the mysteries of the kingdom". And really what happens is, this gospel writer is - is very angry. He is angry about some things. He's mostly angry about the way that people are being put to death in this period, and so Jesus is sent to teach and to heal. And the teaching he gives Judas is that there is a realm beyond this realm. That - that people are in error if they think that the material world that we live in is the sum total of everything. (END VIDEO CLIP)

CHARLIE ROSE: We conclude with Peter Gelb, general manager of the Metropolitan Opera. (BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

PETER GELB, GENERAL MANAGER, METROPOLITAN OPERA: When you're dealing with an aging art form, which opera is, it has to be approached as -- with a - with a very modern and extra energetic fashion, and opera has to be treated as both a theatrical as well as a musical, artistic event. And so what I'm trying to do is -- part of my efforts are to bring in the world's greatest theater directors, to make opera true to what it was at the beginning, which is a marriage of music and theater. (END VIDEO CLIP)

CHARLIE ROSE: Back in a moment with the Reverend Dr. James Alexander Forbes, Elaine Pagels, and Karen King, plus Peter Gelb of the Met. (COMMERCIAL BREAK)

CHARLIE ROSE: The Reverend Dr. James Alexander Forbes Jr. is senior minister of the Riverside Church right here in New York City. He is the first African-American to have this position at the multicultural congregation. He was a professor, preaching at the Union Theological Seminary in New York before coming to the pulpit at Riverside. "Newsweek" magazine called him "one of the dozen most effective preachers in the English-speaking world".

At Easter, I'm pleased to have him here to talk about the Easter message and what it means. Welcome. REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: My joy to be with you, Charlie. CHARLIE ROSE: Thank you. Tell me what -- what is the meaning of Easter for all of us?

REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: Well, it is the story that's given so that people can find a reference for the deeper issues of life. It is about hope. It is that in the midst of life, there will be darkness, despair, and death, but that that is not the end of the story, nor is it the heart of the meaning of life beyond our biological existence. Even while we live and when we die, there is a depth of meaning which informs life itself. I think it says you can have hope, that there is grace in the universe, and that beyond anything that would spell total failure or disaster there is a ray of hope. And that's what Easter is about. CHARLIE ROSE: It is the message that there's life after death?

REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: You know, the story has many different meanings. I think that that's one of the central meanings -- that is, that life that God gives is also animated again beyond death. There is a resurrection. There is more. That is what it really says. Whatever your biological existence is, and whatever your senses tell you about that, life says there's more and that we all have access to it.

Now, within the faith, many different people add meaning at one point or the other, but it is the dimension that love offers that is not totally defined by biological existence. I think that's it. CHARLIE ROSE: It is this essence of the Christian message.

REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: I think the heart of the Christian message it is, there is warfare between life and death, and that love brings the victory beyond that death and all of its implications. CHARLIE ROSE: I'm sure part of this is what you would preach if you were preaching as you so frequently did on Easter Sunday. REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: Uh-huh.

CHARLIE ROSE: Tell us what you would be saying if you were preaching on Easter Sunday to that huge congregation at Riverside. REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: I always preach to what I find to be the most serious problem in the culture, and this year, I would say I would preach about fear. The Easter story constantly says fear not. Be not afraid. We are locked into an epidemic of anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder; paranoia. We are not so sure what the future is going to hold. We are not clear about what may attack us from beyond our shores, and we are clear that there are some forces at work within our nation that are perilous for us. We, I would be saying, the message of Easter is be not afraid. There is a way to have quality life, even in the presence of threats from beyond and threats within the country itself. CHARLIE ROSE: That means that it has in part an ecumenical message, that it goes beyond Christianity, without accepting all of the tenets of Christianity. REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: Well, let me say to you, I had a wonderful experience on Tuesday night when a rabbi invited me to enjoy Seder. And I went, and all -- the whole evening, all the 40 steps. It was wonderful.

CHARLIE ROSE: Right.

REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: He spoke about Jewish existence. CHARLIE ROSE: And it had meaning to you. REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: It had meaning - he didn't try to make it a story that says, "This is Jim's story." "This is our story. We share our story with you."

So what else can I do on Easter but to say this is our story? We have our miracles. Some of us believe some parts of it, just as some of you believe the Red Sea and the burning bush. Easter is a time when Christians share a story of

hope with their own adherence of their faith, but to the whole world. CHARLIE ROSE: Do most -- you know a lot more about this than I do. Most religions have those kinds of stories that are at the essence of what their faith is about. REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: Every religion has to address the issue of where do you find hope when everything you see would say you are in a situation beyond hope. All of our traditions have miracle stories, stories that are hard to believe but stories which seem to answer the question, "Can I have confidence that there's grace in this universe amidst all the problems that I face?" Ours is the Easter story that's at the heart of it, but the whole of the Christian faith is about, look, there will be struggles, but if you put your faith in the God who gave life, you will discover that within life and beyond, there is a redeeming element which we often call grace. CHARLIE ROSE: And the meaning of the crucifixion is the struggle?

REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: The struggle is revealed in the crucifixion. That is, if you stand for love, hate will be in the corners waiting to win the day. If you stand for community, rugged individualism that has no respect for other human beings will say, I'm the way.

So you've got a kind of debate about the ultimate issues of life. Which way is it -- darkness, light, death, life, love, hate? Which has the last word? What a dramatic presentation. You almost look at the cross and say, "Oh, death won out. Hate won out." CHARLIE ROSE: Suffering.

REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: "Suffering won out." But Easter in juxtaposition to it says, "Oh, you thought these other, more destructive elements had won out, but alas, we now see that life and love have the last word." CHARLIE ROSE: Is accepting the idea more important than having to believe the reality?

REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: My response to you is my life's history. You know, some years when I'm doing the Easter service, I'm thinking this thing is absolutely literally true. And other times I'm saying, "It's - it's a metaphor for life." At other times I'm saying, they believed it, and I receive strength from what they believe. And other times I'm not so sure. So what I think is this is one of those powerful stories. If you want to take it literally, you got it. If you want to see the metaphor, that is where the depth of the meaning applies to our hearts, no matter which of these positions we take. So I would say some folks get it. You ask me how I know he lives he lives within my heart.

CHARLIE ROSE: And you say to all of them, that however you accept it is OK. REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: I say I have a responsibility to answer what does the God in me reveal to be the meaning for me in this story? Each of us will have to take that for ourselves. I do not discredit those who can't buy the whole miracle part, who can't buy the ascension part. Take what you can. This is a story that each individual can appropriate. Now, religious organizations say if you can't buy it literally true, you are desecrating the whole tradition itself. I am not in that camp. I'm in a camp that believes that the God in me, the spirit in me, accepts me in those years when I'm more literalistic and those years when I'm more metaphorical, and those years when I'm saying, "Oh, I don't know." That God is in me, and assists me in appropriating what I need now. CHARLIE ROSE: Finally, tell me what -- what literally happened at Easter that - that we take note of?

REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: What happened at Easter according to the story is that while it was yet dark the women came, having put the body into the tomb of Josef of Arimathea, they had sealed it, and it was there. They came early so that they could embalm him before the appropriate time had ended for that. When they went to embalm the body, they didn't find it there. They panicked. What has happened? According to the story, the angels appear and say, "Listen, you may think that somebody stole this body. He is not here. He has risen, as he said." And then the story -- remember, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all have variations on the details.

So you put them all together. He was not there because he had been raised up. But then she turns, Mary, and there he is in the garden. And the disciples go to another room, and there he is there. All these stories when put together

would say, here's a guy who was dead, and yet by the power of God who started creation, he was raised anew. And then it goes on to say if the spirit that raised him up lives in your heart, when you reach the valley of the shadow of death, that same spirit will raise you up at the end, but in the midst of life's struggles.

When you reach the valley of the shadow of death, that same spirit when you've been counted out, kind of like those science fictions we see, where - where you thought he was dead and he rises up again to haunt you. There is more life left in us even when we think we're dead than we can imagine. That's what the Easter story is trying to get us to believe. CHARLIE ROSE: Great to have you here. Happy Easter.

REV. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.: My joy, and Happy Easter to you and to my brothers and sisters around the world.

CHARLIE ROSE: Thank you very much. The Reverend Dr. James Alexander Forbes Jr. of Riverside Church. Back in a moment. We'll talk more about Easter and the Christian message and the gospels and new gospels. Stay with us. And now some fascinating new information about Judas and Jesus. The New Testament presents Judas' actions towards Jesus as the most infamous of betrayals. The long-lost Gospel of Judas tells a very different story. It shows Judas as Jesus' favorite disciple and willing collaborator. A new book "Reading Judas" explores this issue. It explains a diversity of beliefs among early Christians. The book's co-authors join me, Elaine Pagels is the Harrington Spear Paine Professor of Religion at Princeton, Karen King is a Winn Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Harvard. I am pleased to have both of these academics on this program. Tell me what we found out about Judas that's important to know.

ELAINE PAGELS: Well, what's extraordinary is that, you know, I think historically we know that Judas probably handed Jesus over to the people who arrested him, and the earliest account in the Gospel of Mark basically just says that, that he did that. CHARLIE ROSE: And - and then an early account says that Jesus knew he was going to be betrayed. ELAINE PAGELS: Yes, and Matthew and Luke each tried to give motives. They said, well, a crime has been committed, why? And they -- one says he did it for money, the other one says the devil entered him. This book, this amazing book, suggests that Jesus . CHARLIE ROSE: You're not talking about your book, you're talking about the Gospel of Judas, or is it . ELAINE PAGELS: The Gospel of Judas . CHARLIE ROSE: Right. ELAINE PAGELS: . says, and the Gospel of John in the New Testament hints at this, that Jesus not only knew it, as you said, but he also sort of knew that it had to happen that way and needed someone to collaborate with him, needed someone to help him make it happen. CHARLIE ROSE: So he chose Judas for that reason. ELAINE PAGELS: He chose Judas. CHARLIE ROSE: Why would he choose Judas?

ELAINE PAGELS: We don't know, but we know that Judas handed him over. And according to this gospel, there is a mystery in that, and there is - there are things that Judas understood that the others didn't. CHARLIE ROSE: What we also - we're -- we are hearing here that Judas said Jesus told him and only him stuff. KAREN KING: That's right.

CHARLIE ROSE: What was that stuff?

KAREN KING: You know, that stuff he calls "the mysteries of the kingdom." And it -- really what happens is this gospel writer is - is very angry, and he's angry about some - some things. He's mostly angry about the way that people are being put to death in this period.

And so Jesus is sent to teach and to heal. And the teaching he gives Judas is that there is a realm beyond this realm, that - that people are in error if they think that the material world that we live in is the sum total of everything. If they think that this body and the soul we have here, and the gods that we can see in the heavens that they worship are the true gods, they are in error and worshipping false gods.

And so, what Jesus tells Judas is your deepest spiritual connection of any human being is the spiritual connection to God, and that there's a realm above

this realm, and that people need to know that in order to be saved. CHARLIE ROSE: What does it say about martyrdom?

KAREN KING: This text has a very complicated position on martyrdom, because on the one hand, Judas is actually for this text the first martyr. And he doesn't commit suicide the way we learn from the gospels. He is actually put to death by the other 12. But this text is angry . CHARLIE ROSE: To death by the other 12?

KAREN KING: By the other 12. CHARLIE ROSE: How do they put him to death?

KAREN KING: They stone him. He has a vision in which - in which he sees the 12 stoning him to death. And - and yet the anger in this text is directed at those Christian leaders who are telling other Christians that God wants them to die, that God wants their deaths to glorify him, that they are sacrifices pleasing to God. And the Gospel of Judas says, what kind of god is that? What kind of god would desire the death of his son, would desire of the death of martyrs?

CHARLIE ROSE: And so, it was concerned that . KAREN KING: That's a false god.

CHARLIE ROSE: This gospel was concerned that people were going out willingly dying for God, and that was a - it didn't -- and was - was worried that people would be doing that because it was part of Jesus's sacrifice. ELAINE PAGELS: Yes, and when -- you know, the usual story you hear from Christians and from Christian history is that Christian martyrs went joyfully to their deaths because it was a great thing to do. We now see what happens to groups of people, real people, when some leaders are arrested, they're tortured, various people are taken to prison, strangled, and - and publicly exhibited for his torture and execution. This divided people. They said -- as you said -- some said, "That's great. I mean, God loves to see his -- his beloved die as martyrs." And this author says, you're making God into a monster. CHARLIE ROSE: Yeah. ELAINE PAGELS: What kind of monster wouldn't forgive sins if Jesus hadn't died or -- go ahead. CHARLIE ROSE: Let me pull back for a second. ELAINE PAGELS: Go ahead.

CHARLIE ROSE: Where do we find this gospel? Where do we find this?

KAREN KING: Well, it's one among many gospels we found in Egypt, and this particular one was found sometime in the 1970s in the area of El Minya, sort of in central Egypt, which is just about all we know about the actual discovery. But then, it was moved around. At the very beginning when it was found, it was in actually very good condition, you know, in terms of the actual papyrus. It's a - the Gospel of Judas is found in a codex . CHARLIE ROSE: Right. KAREN KING: . which is an ancient papyrus book . CHARLIE ROSE: Right. KAREN KING: . dates to the 4th century. But by the time it had been stored and mishandled for almost over 20 years, it had come into little tiny scraps of materials that - that took a team, a professional team of papyrologists almost five years to sort of reassemble and put these little pieces back together to give us as much as we have. And unfortunately, much was damaged and destroyed in that process. CHARLIE ROSE: So you didn't get a lot of stuff.

KAREN KING: We got a lot of it.

CHARLIE ROSE: Now do we - do we know - I mean -- what basis do we have of knowing, because of people for a long time in early Christianity denied that Jesus said anything to individual disciples about anything. ELAINE PAGELS: Well, actually, if you read the New Testament, it says he clearly did. And the Gospel of Mark said he taught certain disciples privately, but it doesn't tell you much of the private teaching, and the gospel . CHARLIE ROSE: But was that dismissed, though, because people, early Christians -- the first writers about early Christianity didn't want to give it any credit?

ELAINE PAGELS: Well, yeah, I mean we know, as you know, that there were dozens of gospels that circulated, many gospels have circulated, and some of them claimed to be the secret teaching of Jesus. And if it was, if any of it was, Jesus would have been teaching, as other rabbis did. You know, you teach one way to crowds of thousands and you teach another way to your initiated disciples, to the people you really know. And these gospels claim to communicate some of that.

CHARLIE ROSE: Tell me where Judas stood among the other disciples? I mean, how is he in terms of age, in terms of relationship, in terms of where he came from?

ELAINE PAGELS: We know little about Judas Iscariot. All we know is that he was one of the disciples . CHARLIE ROSE: His betrayal. ELAINE PAGELS: And that for some reason and, as I said, the first gospel doesn't even speculate. It just seems so mysterious. And later people -- there were various stories and ways of talking about it, trying to figure out why he would do that. CHARLIE ROSE: You both say that you emerged from the first reading of this feeling that he was an angry man. ELAINE PAGELS: There is a lot of vehemence in this book, and I think what Karen said, he is angry at the leaders of the church who're basically telling, I would imagine, young people to go die for God as martyrs. CHARLIE ROSE: Right. Right. But the anger - the anger was primarily about the notion of going to die for God . ELAINE PAGELS: Yes. CHARLIE ROSE: . and not wanting to see people sacrifice . ELAINE PAGELS: Right. And it's not . CHARLIE ROSE: . because the idea was Jesus was a loving person rather than someone who wanted you to die for him. ELAINE PAGELS: Well, it's not saying that -- if you're up against, you know, denying your convictions, you might - you might die for them. CHARLIE ROSE: Right.

ELAINE PAGELS: But -- but to say you should go out and do that, you'll get great rewards in heaven if you're a martyr. You'll get a, you know, a glorified body and other things, to say that is - is kind of a complicit in murder. CHARLIE ROSE: As we now know, I mean, there are people who in today's . ELAINE PAGELS: Yes. CHARLIE ROSE: . religious fanaticism . ELAINE PAGELS: Yes. CHARLIE ROSE: . or deeply religious thoughts, people are engaged in all kinds of self-sacrifice.

ELAINE PAGELS: Right.

CHARLIE ROSE: For what they say, for religious purposes and on the promise that the world they're going to . ELAINE PAGELS: Yes. CHARLIE ROSE: . will be much better. Is there any connection, say, between Islam and what it says or what people who are Muslim say, especially those who are committing acts of suicide? And this -- some of the kinds of things we're talking about early Christianity?

ELAINE PAGELS: Well, both Christians and Muslims have radical groups in which martyrdom, and even killing people is sometimes condoned. And this seems like . CHARLIE ROSE: In the name of God. ELAINE PAGELS: In the name of God. And this is a religious leader who says, doing that, encouraging people to die that way is a kind of . CHARLIE ROSE: Yeah. ELAINE PAGELS: . a complicity in murder, and it certainly condemns that violence. CHARLIE ROSE: When you say that - that the history of Christianity is almost always - that history is always written by the side that won, and the history of Christianity is no different, what do we mean when we say, the side that won?

KAREN KING: Well, in this case, we can see clearly how the tradition has been censored, how only some materials have come down to us, and others have not. We have the gospels, these new ones that have survived, because someone hid them. Otherwise, they wouldn't have come down to us at all. And even more . CHARLIE ROSE: They hid them because they would have been destroyed. KAREN KING: They would have been burned. They would be destroyed. Or there is the real case in which, of course, if you don't copy books, they simply, you know, cease to exist. But these were cases where these books were strongly condemned as heresy. And they were - people . CHARLIE ROSE: Because? Because?

KAREN KING: They were condemned as heresy - well, this case, for example, we can see how voices that opposed the heroization of martyrdom were silenced. And in some ways, that - that too, is about . CHARLIE ROSE: That was why it was heresy, because it opposes the heroization? Being a hero by engaging a martyrdom?

KAREN KING: It opposed some very basic things that people think are the main-streams of Christianity today. It objects to understanding Jesus' death as a sacrifice for sins. It objects to understanding the deaths of martyrs as sacri-

fices pleasing for God. It objects to practicing the common meal, the Eucharist, as a sacrifice, and it rejects this notion that there will be a resurrection of the flesh, not just for Jesus, but for all believers. CHARLIE ROSE: OK, but I mean -- you can accept it for Jesus without necessarily assuming that it's the cause of action for yourself, can you not?

KAREN KING: Well, I think people do, but it's an inconsistency, and in the early church, that position would have been heresy. CHARLIE ROSE: Why did Christianity prevail?

ELAINE PAGELS: Well, that's a very interesting question. And - and it's I guess the one that drives the kind of work we do. This became an enormously popular and powerful new religion, but only when it was institutionalized, and certain people established in a way a single system, a Christian system, and - and suppressed all dissidents, did it become established that way, and that, as Karen said, required a lot of censorship. And one of the reasons it prevailed is because the emperor patronized it finally in the 4th century. CHARLIE ROSE: And tell me who Jesus was to you. KAREN KING: Jesus was to me a great teacher, and it's his teachings that I think have formed the core of Christianity and that were built on, but when he was put to death, I think that put Christians in a crisis, and they needed to think about why, why he, you know, he died. And they had visions of him. I think these were visionary experiences. CHARLIE ROSE: This is what the gospels are about, visions. KAREN KING: Yeah, yeah, and that out of this then came, you know, developed Christianity as a religion. And the notion of the importance of Jesus' physical resurrection from the dead I think is very much attached to the martyrs, to the notion that - that people's bodies are dying for God. And so, they need to be redeemed. CHARLIE ROSE: And you, Jesus?

ELAINE PAGELS: Well, you know, when -- let's go back to Christianity. It's easier than Jesus. When you say . CHARLIE ROSE: It's easier than Jesus?

ELAINE PAGELS: Yeah, when you say . CHARLIE ROSE: But you know what I mean - simply what we just talked about. Tell me what you believe about Jesus?

ELAINE PAGELS: What do you believe? Just - let's just -- let me respond to what you said before. What I believe about this kind of study is it can open up the questions. You can say, "Well, wait a minute, how do you know that? Is that true, and what about this? And what about that?" And those are questions that often weren't invited. So for the first time, you know, we're just seeing it quite differently. And that allows me to participate in this tradition, take some things and - and reject others. CHARLIE ROSE: Yeah. You made note of the fact that Jon Meacham was on this program, and we actually edited it out for some reason -- to Jon, you know, I'm sorry, because - I'm -- he and I had this conversations about this, but he accepted that Jesus as his - what do you say?