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BELIEFS / Q&A; Continued discovery within 'secret gospels'

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There was a time when scholars of early Christianity labored in anonymity at the bottom of academic pecking orders.

Then came Princeton professor Elaine Pagels, whose "The Gnostic Gospels" became a surprise bestseller in the 1970s and ignited international interest in the hidden sayings of a strange band of believers scorned by orthodox Christians.

Those gospels were discovered six decades ago in a jar buried in Egypt. Few ancient texts about Jesus outside of the New Testament have provoked more controversy and confusion because of their startling alternative views of early Christianity and their riddle-like teachings.

Some researchers believe the gospels are relics of a form of Christianity that believed that the creator of the known universe -- a realm of suffering, loss and pain -- was a flawed god. Above this deity was the one true god of ultimate reality.

Jesus, according to this view, came to teach that human beings contain a spark of the divine spirit, which, through death, could be released to return to the one true god.

Other scholars say the Gnostic texts reveal an unadulterated faith that is tolerant, egalitarian, wise and spiritual.

Still others have used the texts to support bizarre health regimens, Holy Grail conspiracy theories and more.

Pagels argues that the truth, like everything else about these papyrus manuscripts, is complicated.

"We're learning new things about them all the time," said Pagels, 53, who lectured at the Getty Center on Wednesday about the newly discovered Gospel of Judas. "In fact, if I was writing it today, I wouldn't use the term 'Gnostic' in the title of my first book.

"I'd use something else, like 'the other Christian gospels,' because what was found in that jar in Egypt was a miscellaneous collection of early Christian gospels and other texts. We can't generalize about them."

This much is clear. Pagels, a practicing Episcopalian, sparked a controversy that continues to shape modern views of Christianity, and her work has shown the surprisingly diverse views of Jesus that faith once embraced.

In the meantime, she's been racking up prestigious literary awards, starring on cable channel programs and burning up the lecture circuits.

Not bad for a Palo Alto woman raised by a family of scientists who taught her that scientific discovery had made religion obsolete.

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Now that your name shows up in the first sentence of the first chapter in "The Complete Idiot's Guide to the Gnostic Gospels," some would say you're a certified icon in the world of lost ideas.

No. I think of myself as a scholar lucky to have started working on something I'm passionately interested in -- secret gospels -- which also happens to be among the most puzzling mysteries of the 21st century.

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What stirred your interest in obscure religious sects in the first place?

My father was a biologist who had no use for religion. He thought it was naive. But at 13 and 14, I began to find religious notions powerful and compelling. Whether it was the great cathedrals of Europe or Hopi dancers, I sensed in them a potent spiritual dimension of life that I just had to explore.

Later, when I went off to study the early history of Christianity at Harvard, I was surprised to discover that my professors had file cabinets filled with early Christian texts that didn't make it into the Bible. We were told they were bizarre, heretical, nonsensical, full of philosophical fantasies and religious junk. That's also what the fathers of the orthodox Christian church said. They called them "illegitimate secret writings."

After a close read, they changed my understanding of what early Christianity was all about.

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The word "Gnostic" derives from "gnosis," the Greek word for knowledge. But what is Gnosticism?

We really don't know. The term "Gnostic" has been used in so many ways over the years it's hard to say. The label has been used by people who attacked certain early beliefs as the wrong kind of Christianity and by New Agey types.

Referring to the authors of these texts as Gnostic only accepts that negative judgment. But the people who wrote them didn't think of themselves as belonging to a school called Gnosticism. They were spiritual leaders who thought they had gone beyond simple faith to a deeper understanding.

Essentially, they were trying to make a distinction between anthropomorphic notions of God and the divine reality.

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Where do they rank in comparison with the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John?

I think of them now as the other texts that were not included in the canon. Much of what was in the canon was to be used in public church. But, as in Judaism, there were certain secret teachings -- or advanced teachings -- that were not to be taught publicly or even written down.

They were only to be shared with certain disciples when they were ready. In other words, the New Testament Gospels were the texts students of Christianity began with. Some moved on to the secret teachings.

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Globalization is proceeding at a ferocious pace even as religious wars and ethnic cleansings occur around the world. Then there's global warming. From your study of Gnosticism, what really matters?

Some of these texts are powerful and practical today. In the Gospel of Thomas, for example, Jesus says: "If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you. If you do not have that within you, what you do not have within you will kill you."

I took that statement psychologically; it's an image of the truth, illumination and divine presence to be found in every human being. It teaches that within every human life is a bit of the divine source, and everything comes from that source. Therefore, all life is to be respected as coming from God's creation.

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Some critics contend that Gnosticism is narcissistic -- more concerned about self-realization than in making the world a better place to live. Your response?

Opponents of these texts have always said they were written by elitist snobs. I disagree. The Gospel of Truth teaches to stretch out your hands to those who are sick and to awaken those who are asleep. God's will is that all beings come to love him and one another.

In the Gospel of Thomas, it says that we love our brother as the apple of our eye.

Again, these are esoteric texts that assume you have read the other Gospels where Jesus heals the sick and cares for the poor.

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Many people who investigate the hubbub over Gnosticism are dismayed by sayings, such as one in the Gospel of Thomas:

"Simon Peter said to them, 'Mary should leave us, for females are not worthy of life.' Jesus said, 'Look, I shall guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter heaven's kingdom.' "

What's egalitarian about that?

It's hard to know what that saying means. But taking it literally may not be what it's really about.

In any case, I don't have a romantic view of these authors as perfectly wise. Some of these texts expand our understanding of early Christianity and are worth looking at.

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Some suggest that your descriptions of Gnostic thinking are biased by your own wishful thinking and spiritual longings.

The texts are hard to read and cryptic; much more complicated than anyone thought. So, any of us could be mistaken in our interpretations. I just want to understand them better.

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