

ARE YOU A UU GNOSTIC?
UUMH – Chatham, Mass.
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August 13, 2006

If you heard the following description of a contemporary religious group who might you think is being described?

“They agree that only one’s own experience offers the ultimate testimony of truth, taking precedence over all secondhand testimony and all tradition. They celebrate every form of creative invention as evidence that a person has become spiritually alive. They say that the structure of religious authority can never be fixed into an institutional framework, but must remain open and spontaneous. Every one of them, just as it suits his or her own temperament, modifies the traditions received, just as those who handed them down modified them when they shaped them according to their own needs and desires.

“Further, these people cast doubts on the concept of God as traditionally understood in the Bible as a personal creator God. They say that the anthropomorphic words and images of God are not the true reality. God is better described or understood as the ground or source of all being. God is beyond sex gender, female images of the divine are just as appropriate as masculine images of the divine. Men and women are spiritual equals in every respect and can perform priestly and ministerial duties without distinction. Many of them assert that there is a spark of the divine in every human self and that the best way to get to know what God is is to get to know your deepest and truest self.

“The real obstacle to salvation is not sin but ignorance. These people speak of the Virgin Birth of Christ as a metaphor of spiritual rebirth while denying the historical and biological fact. And finally, they interpret the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as an inner spiritual experience that can happen to people now rather than a physical historical event of the past that can never be experienced again as it was by the original disciples and apostles. In short, these heretics undermine the basis of all religious, Biblical, doctrinal, priestly, and institutional authority established and held dear by all true Christians.”

Who might you think is being described? If you’re thinking that this is a fair description of some irascible, spaced out Unitarian Universalists, you would not be far wrong. The shoe certainly seems to fit without a great deal of pinch to it, quite comfortable in fact. If this is not a description of Unitarian Universalists then whoever they are they must be our spiritual cousins. The fact of the matter is the above words (paraphrased as they are) are a description of first and second century Gnostic Christians who were anathematized by their orthodox brethren—their scrolls and writings suppressed and destroyed, their religious movement driven underground. The similarities with Unitarian Universalism today are such that we might well ask ourselves, individually and collectively, “Am I, are you, a UU Gnostic?”

Back in 1979 Dr. Elaine Pagels, a liberal Christian scholar, published a book entitled, The Gnostic Gospels, which told of the discovery of these ancient heretical texts by an Arab peasant at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945, and the years of political intrigue, smuggling, black market sales, and scholarly competition and jealousy which delayed their translation and publication to the general public for some 30 years. Elaine Pagels not only revealed the nature and content of these ancient texts, but went on to uncover and interpret their theological and social implications for the church today. She has since published a number of subsequent books in this field including her most recent book in 2003 on Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas. She was a speaker at last year's 2005 UUA General Assembly, and was very well received.

Interest in these matters has been prompted by two recent events and publications—one a best selling novel and movie—The DaVinci Code by Dan Brown, which suggests that Jesus had a close intimate relation to Mary Magdalene who presumably emigrated to Southern France and gave birth to a daughter and subsequent progeny in a continuous bloodline down to the present day. The Gospel of Mary Magdalene takes on special interest as do a number of other references to Mary in some of the other Gnostic Gospels which lend some support to such a notion. One of the things we might surmise from these references to Jesus and the Magdalene is that there appears to have been serious competition and jealousy between followers of Peter and followers of Mary Magdalene in the early church. In the end the Peterine faction won out and the role of women in the church was eventually downgraded and repressed.

The other event and publication is The Gospel of Judas, published just a few months ago by the National Geographic Society, and which has its own tale of political and economic intrigue over a period of years, with attempts to sell, then rejected and nearly lost and crumbling and almost destroyed, before a near miraculous recovery and resurrection. In 180 A.D. Irenaeus, one of the early church Fathers, spoke disparagingly of The Gospel of Judas and other Gnostic writings, because they contradicted what was in the canonical Gospels. The Gospel of Judas was, he said, pure fiction, and made Judas into a hero to be emulated rather than a villain to be despised. He wanted none of it and the Judas Gospel disappeared from history until very recently. Now we can judge for ourselves what is history or fiction and whether it matters.

It is interesting to note that back in 1965 a British N.T. scholar, Hugh Schonfield, wrote a best selling book entitled, The Passover Plot, in which he maintained that Jesus believed himself to be the Jewish Messiah, and subsequently plotted his actions (with the assistance of others) to culminate in the events of the Passion Week, leading to his arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection, in order to fulfill the messianic prophecies of Israel. What Schonfield did not know at the time was that the writer of the Gospel of Judas in the First or Second Century described a similar plot with the figure of Judas in the leading role of helping Jesus carry out his messianic mission with a Gnostic twist.

What these Gnostic texts show is that there was a great deal more diversity of religious and theological views in the early church than was heretofore thought to be the case. Unanimity simply did not exist. In fact, suggests Elaine Pagels, there was more diversity

of religious views extant then than exist now in the church in spite of all the divers' sects and denominations we have today. The reason is that most Christian denominations and sects accept the N.T. canon as scripture, the Apostles Creed and Nicene Creed as basic doctrine, and the institution of the church howsoever defined as having authority rooted in historical tradition.

The Gnostics recognized none of these, accepted other writings as Scripture beyond the traditional Gospels and Letters of Paul, had a varied and changing corpus of religious doctrine that was constantly being reinterpreted and added to out of the insights and inspirations of those among them. In other words they wrote their own Scripture. As Dr. Pagels notes, "Like circle of artists today, Gnostics considered original creative invention to be the mark of anyone who becomes spiritually alive."

A number of the Gnostic texts discovered at Nag Hammadi were pagan or Jewish in origin and content (rather than just Christian). What this indicates is that the Gnostic heresy was not simply a reaction to Christian thought and doctrine of the time, but is the expression of a more universal experience of the human self, of cosmic reality, the question of God and the problem of evil and suffering. The titles of these texts are intriguing to our ears because none of them are to be found in the N.T. canon. Among others there was The Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of the Egyptians, the Gospel of Truth, the Secret Book of James, Thunder Perfect Mind, The Gospel According to Mary (Magdalene), and now, of course, The Gospel of Judas.

All of the texts were Coptic translations, about 1500 years old, of still more ancient manuscripts in Greek, probably 350-400 A.D. The date of composition of the *original* Greek texts is around A.D. 120-150, or earlier. Irenaeus, Christian church father, writing in 180 A.D. complained that heretics "boast to possess more gospels than there really are," and that such gospels had wide circulation from Gaul to Rome, Greece and Asia Minor. Elaine Pagels suggests that the date of these heretical gospels could be even earlier than the second century, some (like the Gospel of Thomas) possibly as early as the Synoptic Gospels and John in the N.T. (50 to 100 A.D.), which would push the Gnostic heresy right back to the very earliest beginnings of the Christian movement, suggesting perhaps, though she doesn't say so, that even Jesus was something of a Gnostic himself.

What Elaine Pagels has in fact shown is that the Gnostic heresy was not simply a struggle over theological doctrine and interpretation, but more importantly, was a struggle over social, political and institutional authority and control. For example, when some of the Gnostics asserted that the resurrection was an inner visionary experience of the soul as cited by Mary Magdalene (a woman, and the first to report an experience of the resurrection in the N.T. Gospels), and that they cite as *Scriptural* authority *the Gospel of Mary* (named for Mary Magdalene), in so doing they were undermining the masculine clerical authority of priests and bishops. The latter traced their authority through apostolic succession back to Peter whose followers claimed him to be the first disciple to see the risen Christ in bodily form, meaning a physical resurrection.

So it wasn't possible for the orthodox to agree to disagree as we do in religiously pluralistic 21st century America. To do so would have been to undermine the institution of the church as therein embodied. It is certainly questionable whether Christianity could have survived without a strengthened and unified church institution, imposed though that unity may have been, which appealed to the common masses and not merely to an intellectual and spiritual elite, which was the main appeal of the Gnostics. One of the complaints about UUs today is that our main appeal is still to an intellectual educated elite.

Are you a UU Gnostic? In many respects the ancient Gnostics are our spiritual ancestors, but by no means in every respect. A Gnostic is the opposite of an agnostic. An agnostic is one who admits that he doesn't know the truth about reality and God and that it is probably not possible for any human being to know absolute truth. A Gnostic is one who believes he has come to know spiritual reality and truth through direct experience.

With the Gnostics we recognize individual experience as a source of spiritual authority, but we are not so confident that our experience is in fact a true insight into the nature of reality, for we know how fallible, short-sighted, and subject to distortion and misinterpretation is all human experience. We remain agnostic about our Gnosticism, at least we ought to, for such a stance prevents us from becoming arrogant and elitist about our particular understanding of reality and truth, which we should always remember is from a very limited individual perspective.

The Gnostics were different from contemporary UU's in other respects as well. The Gnostics spun a host of metaphysical cosmologies that to us would seem to be fantastic, elaborate, mythical, complex, and antithetical to our understanding of the universe in its outer aspects. Tertullian, one of the early church fathers, ridiculed Gnostic cosmologies with their multi-storied heavens like apartment houses with "room piled on room, assigned to each god....The universe", he commented, "has been turned into rooms for rent!" (With the housing shortage and homelessness being what it is perhaps we ought to turn to the Gnostic Realty, Co., Cosmic Enterprises, Inc., for a solution to our problem.) But Tertullian, who asserted that he believed in the orthodox Christian doctrines *because* they were absurd, was hardly one to knock the absurdities of the Gnostic doctrines.

The Gnostics tended to be anti-materialistic in their view of the physical body and world, i.e., they believed that the soul, the divine spark in human nature, was a prisoner in the physical body in a material universe not made by the true God. Salvation consisted in freeing the soul from its imprisonment in the material creation and leading it back to its true spiritual home in the divine One. Unitarian Universalists with historical roots in deism and N.E. Transcendentalism have always had a deep appreciation for nature as an expression of beauty, truth, order, law and reason, and revelatory of the divine. In this regards we are more akin to the ancient Stoics than to the Gnostics. The Stoics believed that the material universe was an expression of the divine nature, not alien to it as the Gnostics were wont to believe.

Andrew Greely, a Catholic scholar, says, “You would not want to invite a Gnostic home for dinner—he probably wouldn’t want to come since eating and drinking as well as sex interfered with the freedom of the spirit to know God.” There are probably a good many Christian fundamentalists who would not care to invite a Unitarian Universalist home for dinner, for perhaps opposite reasons—we eat and drink too much and have an excessive interest in sexual matters and teach our kids about it in Sunday School.

Are you a UU Gnostic? Yes, except that we remain agnostic about our Gnosticism. We are none of us “know-it-alls” about anything in this life or this world, much less about anything in the next life or world if such there be. We have cause to be humble in what little knowledge and wisdom we do possess. We gather to share whatever portion of truth we have discovered, and to praise in wondrous joy the vastness and awesome beauty of a creation that transcends the capacity of our minds to comprehend. Praise, praise, be to the fathomless universe, and to the infinite power of being in which we live and move and have our being, world without end. Amen.