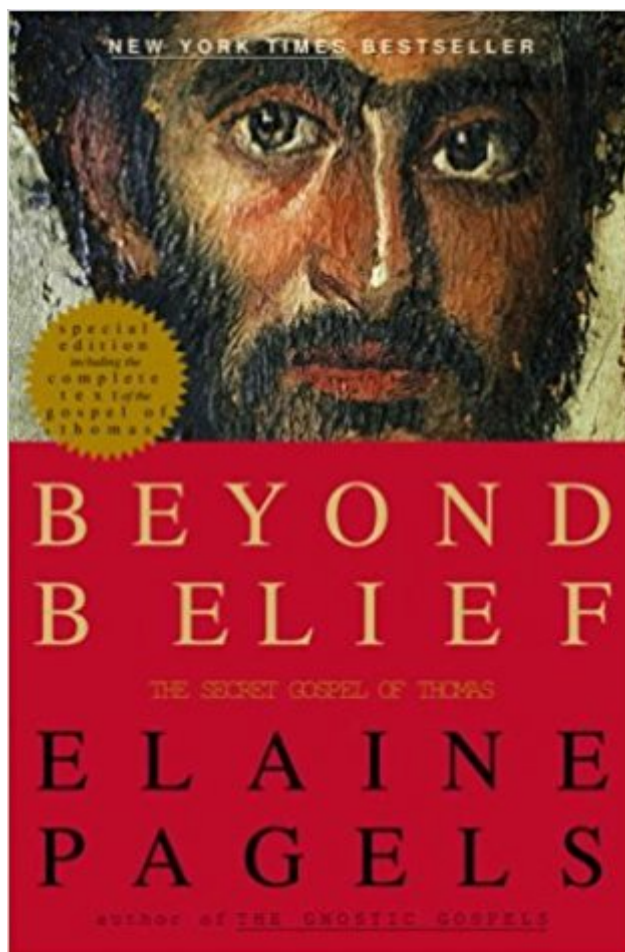


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Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel Of Thomas



Synopsis

Special edition including the complete text of the Gospel of Thomas Elaine Pagels, one of the world's most important writers and thinkers on religion and history, and winner of the National Book Award for her groundbreaking work *The Gnostic Gospels*, now reflects on what matters most about spiritual and religious exploration in the twenty-first century. This bold new book explores how Christianity began by tracing its earliest texts, including the secret Gospel of Thomas, rediscovered in Egypt in 1945. When her infant son was diagnosed with fatal pulmonary hypertension, Elaine Pagels's spiritual and intellectual quest took on a new urgency, leading her to explore historical and archeological sources and to investigate what Jesus and his teachings meant to his followers before the invention of doctrine and before the invention of Christianity as we know it. The astonishing discovery of the Gospel of Thomas, along with more than fifty other early Christian texts unknown since antiquity, offers startling clues. Pagels compares such sources as Thomas's gospel (which claims to give Jesus's secret teaching, and finds its closest affinities with kabbalah) with the canonic texts to show how Christian leaders chose to include some gospels and exclude others from the collection we have come to know as the New Testament. To stabilize the emerging Christian church in times of devastating persecution, the church fathers constructed the canon, creed, and hierarchy and, in the process, suppressed many of its spiritual resources. Drawing on new scholarship of her own, and that of an international group of scholars that has come to light since the publication in 1979 of *The Gnostic Gospels*, Pagels shows that what matters about Christianity involves much more than any one set of beliefs. Traditions embodied in Judaism and Christianity can powerfully affect us in heart, mind, and spirit, inspire visions of a new society based on practicing justice and love, even heal and transform us. Provocative, beautifully written, and moving, *Beyond Belief*, the most personal of Pagels's books to date, shows how "the impulse to seek God overflows the narrow banks of a single tradition." Pagels writes, "What I have come to love in the wealth and diversity of our religious traditions and the communities that sustain them is that they offer the testimony of innumerable people to spiritual discovery, encouraging us, in Jesus's words, to seek, and you shall find." •

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Customer Reviews

Shortly after Elaine Pagels's two-and-half-year-old son was diagnosed with a rare lung disease, the religion professor found herself drawn to a Christian church again for the first time in many years. In *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* Pagels, best known for her National Book Award-winning *The Gnostic Gospels*, wrestles with her own faith as she struggles to understand when--and why--Christianity became associated almost exclusively with the ideas codified in the fourth-century Nicene Creed and in the canonical texts of the New Testament. In her exploration, she uncovers the richness and diversity of Christian philosophy that has only become available since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts. At the center of *Beyond Belief* is what Pagels identifies as a textual battle between *The Gospel of Thomas* (rediscovered in Egypt in 1945) and *The Gospel of John*. While these gospels have many superficial similarities, Pagels demonstrates that John, unlike Thomas, declares that Jesus is equivalent to "God the Father" as identified in the Old Testament. Thomas, in contrast, shares with other supposed secret teachings a belief that Jesus is not God but, rather, is a teacher who seeks to uncover the divine light in all human beings. Pagels then shows how the Gospel of John was used by Bishop Irenaeus of Lyon and others to define orthodoxy during the second and third centuries. The secret teachings were literally driven underground, disappearing until the Twentieth Century. As Pagels argues this process "not only impoverished the churches that remained but also impoverished those [Irenaeus] expelled." *Beyond Belief* offers a profound framework with which to examine Christian history and contemporary Christian faith, and Pagels renders her scholarship in a highly readable narrative. The one deficiency in Pagels's examination of Thomas, if there is one, is that she never fully returns in the end to her own struggles with religion that so poignantly open the book. How has the

mysticism of the Gnostic Gospels affected her? While she hints that she and others have found new pathways to faith through Thomas, the impact of Pagels' work on contemporary Christianity may not be understood for years to come. --Patrick O'Kelley

In this majestic new book, Pagels (The Gnostic Gospels) ranges panoramically over the history of early Christianity, demonstrating the religion's initial tremendous diversity and its narrowing to include only certain texts supporting certain beliefs. At the center of her book is the conflict between the gospels of John and Thomas. Reading these gospels closely, she shows that Thomas offered readers a message of spiritual enlightenment. Rather than promoting Jesus as the only light of the world, Thomas taught individuals that "there is a light within each person, and it lights up the whole universe. If it does not shine, there is darkness." As she eloquently and provocatively argues, the author of John wrote his gospel as a refutation of Thomas, portraying the disciple Thomas as a fool when he doubts Jesus, and Jesus as the only true light of the world. Pagels goes on to demonstrate that the early Christian writer Irenaeus promoted John as the true gospel while he excluded Thomas, and a host of other early gospels, from the list of those texts that he considered authoritative. His list became the basis for the New Testament canon when it was fixed in 357. Pagels suggests that we recover Thomas as a way of embracing the glorious diversity of religious tradition. As she elegantly contends, religion is not merely an assent to a set of beliefs, but a rich, multifaceted fabric of teachings and experiences that connect us with the divine. Exhilarating reading, Pagels's book offers a model of careful and thoughtful scholarship in the lively and exciting prose of a good mystery writer. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I want to thank Dr. Pagels for making me realise for the first time that the Gospel of Thomas is not just gnostic /cosmic gibberish. It has real deep spiritual meaning and I loved this book for that. Now I have much more appreciation for the Gospel of Thomas and the tools to understand it as it was meant to be. Unfortunately, she quickly deviates from this subject and goes to explain the conflicts in Christianity in the 2nd and 3rd centuries for the rest of the book. Actually, this well-written book is more about the life of Church father Irenaeus than Thomas.

I started with a question as to how John Lennon and Nowhere Man were related to the non-canonical gospels. Pagels had a speaking engagement nearby and a local theologian recommended going (which I could not) or reading the first chapter of Beyond Belief. I ended up reading all of the book and it answered most of my questions but raised many more. She is a

historian of religion and covers the period from the end of the New Testament through to Constantine when church and state were completely one. I will return to her work, especially on the Gospel of Thomas, where I really began chasing many rabbits down many holes.

Is 'Jesus' God or simply "one of us" pointing us to God? This question is the crux of Pagels' book: the Gospel of John (Jesus is divine) or the Gospel of Thomas (Jesus comes forth from the divine light, but so do we all). The Nicene council cemented the Christian statement of faith, but according to Pagels' history, could have, or should have, pushed another gospel. 'Beyond Belief' is more than a discussion about why John got in the Bible; 'Beyond Belief' is also a book about the skeptic, for skeptics. This is a book that affirms the questioning Christian and historically supports the doubting 'Thomas'. With Pagels you will have a friend and advocate; one who states that it is not only dutiful, but historically correct for Christians to question the divinity of Jesus. This book is, in actuality, about accepting your place, in the Christian world, as a heretic. Heresy originally meant - the act of choice. And if you 'choose' which elements of Christianity to accept and practice, and which to reject, then you fit Pagels' definition of heretic. For Pagels the choice not to unquestioningly accept religious authority is good, right and what those seeking both truth and God, must ultimately do. Elaine Pagels so states: "Most of us, sooner or later, find that, at critical points in our lives, we must strike out on our own to make a path where none exists." Highly recommended for those who think outside the big box.

BEYOND BELIEF compares the Gospel of John with the Gospel of St. Thomas found among a cache of texts near Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt in 1945. Pagels suggests that both were written about the same time, about sixty years after Jesus's death. John emphasizes belief in Jesus Christ as god (something that is not implicit in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke); Jesus is a supreme being, separate from man and if we are to be saved we must believe in him. Thomas, on the other hand, argues that God's light shines within and that we should seek to know God through our own, divinely given capacity. Parts of BEYOND BELIEF are quite compelling, such as Pagel's portrayal of early Christians living by the Golden Rule, even during the plague when they stayed with their fellow Christians while everyone else ran away to save themselves. Non-believers saw this and wanted to be part of this compassionate religion. Most of the book, however, deals with how the New Testament came about. Pagel gives most of the credit to early church father Irenaeus who emphasized the Gospel of John and put it above Matthew, Mark, and Luke although it was written later. Pagels argues that the Gospel of John may have been a response to the Gospel of

Thomas, since it is the only one that shows St. Thomas doubting Christ when he appeared to the Apostles after rising from the dead. A later chapter deals with Christianity after Constantine's conversion when he called together catholic bishops to form the Nicene Creed, during which time many of Irenaeus ideas were given an official stamp. A later bishop, Athanasius, called for the destruction of "apocryphal" texts and it was most likely then that St. Thomas's gospel was hidden at Nag Hammadi. Athanasius wanted right thinking among his subjects and warned against something called "epinoia," or spiritual intuition, "a deceptive, all-too human capacity to think subjectively, according to one's preconceptions." If you're expecting a thorough analysis of the Gospel of St. Thomas, you won't find it here (although Pagels does refer the reader to other scholars who discuss it extensively). You will, however, find the entire text in an appendix. Some of it is quite enigmatic, especially saying 114 in which Peter asks Jesus to make Mary Magdalen leave since "females are not worthy of life." Jesus promises to make her male "for every female who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Much of St. Thomas's Gospel is every bit as enigmatic.

Elaine Pagels is one of the true guideposts for spiritual Christian exploration. As an accomplished religion scholar, her examination of early church history has been cogently applied to the personal experiences that have shaped her life and approach to faith. She is a fine and lucid writer, and I've learned much from her.

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