**The Way of the Other: The Pagans and the Gnostics**

**A Sermon for University Congregational Church**

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Traditional Word

"Know what is in front of your face, and what is hidden from you will be disclosed to you. For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed." —The Gospel of Thomas (A Gnostic text)

Contemporary Word

"Why should anyone care about [esoteric wisdom]? Because it challenges our understanding of God, and dares us to transform ourselves. It shatters childish theological images, and discovers a God called Infinity-God as infinity, transforms Gender and Personality."--Daniel Matt, a scholar of Kabbalah and Professor at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley

The Way of the Other: The Pagans and the Gnostics

There is an apocryphal story of a young boy, the son of a farmer, who, while searching for new farmland near the family home in the Egyptian desert in a region called Nag Hammadi, stumbled upon something that would change the world. This was in 1945. The story goes that the boy found a cave and, within it, a collection of papyrus scrolls tucked into clay jars and buried under some stones. The boy took some of the jars and scrolls home, and it is reported that his mother then used some of the papyrus for her cooking fire. Word spread around town about the boy's strange find. The papyrus was filled with odd writing, an ancient form of Coptic, the Egyptian language.

A local dealer of antiquities, right out of an Indiana Jones movie, heard about the scrolls and procured them from the boy's family. As word spread of the discovery, scholars, archeologists, and theologians descended upon Nag Hammadi to see what had been unearthed. There was legal wrangling and some shady dealings and close calls with various ne'er-do-wells, seeking to make a fast buck off of the discovery, but the wiser heads managed to retain almost all of the scrolls in the custody of the Egyptian authorities, where they reside to this day.

I'm not doing the story justice, as some versions include more violence, cannibalism, a genie, and other local mythical elements that make the story more interesting. I, however, always find this story fascinating. What was found at Nag Hammadi was an excellent collection of lost Gnostic writings. The sacred documents of an early, proto-Christian faith community had been found, tucked away in a cave. I always wonder at the irony of that mother's cooking fire—what other treasures were destroyed so that the boy's family could eat?

Who were these Gnostics, and why was this discovery of texts so earth-shaking? Gnostic comes from the root word "to know," and this group claimed special, secret knowledge of the Jesus Event. To better understand this type of "other"—remember, we're studying the Way of the Other—and to better understand this flavor of other, the Gnostics, it is crucial to understand heresy in general and the heresy of the Pagans and Gnostics in particular.

I had a professor who always liked to get us thinking about this question: Which came first; orthodoxy or heresy? The intuitive answer is that how can you have a heresy if you don't have an orthodoxy first? Right? But, what my professor was trying to get us to comprehend was this: What if the version of Christianity that we understand to be "orthodox," that is, the "straight, true teachings of the church," what if THAT was actually the heresy. What if the heretical beliefs condemned by the early institution called "The Catholic –Universal—Church" was actually a form of heresy that somehow made its way to the forefront of belief and supplanted any existing beliefs. Mind blown yet? Mine still is. What he was asking us to do was to suspend our belief for the sake of entertaining the idea that perhaps we got it wrong. Maybe those teachings called heresies, were in reality, the original orthodoxies—the original "true" teachings of the faith.

During first Century Palestine, our Jewish ancestors deemed anyone outside of their faith as pagan. Even the early Followers of Jesus, or Christ-following Jews, used this type of terminology: Pagan, Hellene (meaning someone of Greek descent), Gentile, Heathen--these were all derogatory terms used by those within the faith to paint unbelievers as "other"-- as evil – as a threat to their community and thus to be avoided at all costs. It was already an accepted Jewish custom that devout Jews did not associate with unbelievers—anyone outside of the faith. There are many communities of faith, active today, not just of Jews, but also Christians, Muslims, Buddhists; you name it, that shun non-believers.

We hear of arranged marriages all the time, even in modernity, which are almost exclusively because of religious demands and dogmatic faith. Families (and their communities) do not want to dilute themselves with outsiders—with others—as they often see it as betraying their covenant with the Holy One. It always comes down to interpretation. And fundamental and orthodox beliefs are interpretations that seem like they are written in stone--but maybe they are written more in shale? Or clay? Or even mud. What I mean is, perhaps we need to revisit some of these "orthodox" teachings and see if they are, in reality, ancient heresies.

So, if Pagans were anyone outside of either the Jewish faith or outside of the strange new version of Judaism that would become Christianity, the Gnostics held an exceptional place within the category of Pagan. The Gnostics were believers in a faith system that differentiates an evil god of the material world, often identified by the Gnostics as the God of the Hebrew people, from a higher and more abstract deity who is revealed by Jesus the Christ. Gnostics saw this world as one that had a pantheon of evil powers (they were called archons) that wanted to keep us mere moral humans trapped in these physical bodies and that our souls would descend to Hades if we did not receive the secret, hidden knowledge that the Gnostics knew. The Gnostics were adept at keeping their knowledge secret—it was literally a matter of life and death, for if the growing powers of the institutional church knew you were a Gnostic, then you were probably doomed for imprisonment, torture, and likely execution. That is how "orthodoxy" dealt with what they deemed "heretics" once they understood the POWER available in this interpretation. And the institutional church, manifested now by the Roman Empire, managed to wipe them from the face of the earth. Or did they?

The traditional story about Nag Hammadi is that once the Roman Emporer Diocletian declared them apostate, against the faith, soldiers of Christ marched towards the monastery of Nag Hamadi where they would burn it to the ground, kill the members of the community, and make sure their heretical literature was destroyed—preferably in a fire.

The story gets fascinating as we imagine a few members of the monastery, with scant moments to spare, running into the hills surrounding their community, arms filled with scrolls, to hide the treasured documents--their sacred library. This account of the Nag Hammadi community is now considered probably fiction, a myth, as the Gnostics were already dying out because their "flavor" of the Jesus story failed to gain traction—it was too ambiguous—spread mainly by word of mouth—it's challenging to establish certainty in your faith.

There are numerous references to the Gnostics in other second Century proto-orthodox literature. Most of what we know about them is from the attacks made on them by the early Church Fathers. They wrote numerous polemics against them. References to the Gnostics can be found in your Bible—they are mentioned in several books, including 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus.

Marcion was the most famous of the Gnostics, and he established a "canon" or an authorized version of the Letters of Saint Paul and a "redacted" version of the Gospel of Luke. A sort of particular "bible" that Marcion approved of for teaching. Church Father Justin Martyr talks about Marcion around 150 CE. Irenaeus and Tertullian wrote against Marcion extensively in the late second Century in their treatises "Against Heresy" and "Against Marcion." To this day, orthodoxy teaches that Marcion and HIS interpretations of the Jesus Event were mistakes. Errors. Not fit to be used in any way.

Some scholars have theorized that Gnosticism has its roots in pre-Christian religions instead of being merely an offshoot of Christianity. I am curious about how many of these proto-Christian communities we DON'T know about because of the ravages of time and the thorough work of the early institutional church of eradicating any belief that did NOT align with their new "orthodox" teachings. It was a chaotic and dangerous time for the birth pangs of our faith, as people struggled with interpretations, doctrines, dogmas, and creeds.

Listen to the names of some of the documents included in the Nag Hammadi library: the Gospel of Truth, the Letter to Rheginus, Treatise on the Three Natures, the Apocalypse of Adam, the Gospel of Matthias, Gospel of Philip, Acts of Peter, and Acts of Thomas. Although the Gnostics were prolific writers, most of their works have been burnt or lost to time in favor of alternative proto-orthodox writings. They are known only through those Church Fathers and rare Biblical references I already mentioned. Until this amazing discovery in 1945 of the Nag Hammadi library, little was known of the Gnostics save from those Biblical references and Church Father diatribes.

Let's listen to a bit of Gnostic scripture—this is from the Gospel of Truth, probably written between 140 and 180 CE: Such are they who possess from above something of this immeasurable greatness, as they strain towards that unique and perfect one who exists there for them. And they do not go down to Hades. They have neither envy nor moaning, nor is death in them. But they rest in him who rests, without wearying themselves or becoming involved in the search for truth. But, they, indeed, are the truth, and the Father is in them, and they are in the Father, since they are perfect, inseparable from him who is truly good. They lack nothing in any way, but they are given rest and are refreshed by the Spirit…–isn't that fascinating? I love reading Gnostic documents because it helps me better understand what was happening in the early centuries, not barely a century after the martyrdom and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and they give us crucial insight into how Christianity would develop.

I like what scholar Elaine H. Pagels has to say about the Gnostics: "The term Gnosticism is often used as a sort of umbrella term to cover the people that the leaders of the church don't like. It covers probably a huge variety of points of view. And yet there is a theme; the way I connect text that we think of as gnostic is the sense that the divine is to be discovered by some kind of interior search, and not simply by a savior who is outside of you." You can begin to see how a mystical connection to the Holy One, which is what the Gnostics preferred to do, is going to be in stark opposition to what the developing institutional church is going to insist upon: Salvation only through the intercession of the church on your behalf. Your soul now is under the care of the institutional church, not something precious and integral to your life, but more of a commodity to be managed by priests.

Dr. Pagels goes on to further explain why this is problematic: "Many, many Christians, who are not appreciated by many of the leaders of the church, believed that spiritual awakening was demonstrated in one's capacity to speak in either revelation or dream visions... Such Christians often spoke in poems, in songs, in stories that we would say come out of the creative imagination or the religious imagination. Fathers of the church objected and said, "Well, they're just making up a lot of garbage. It's a ridiculous thing that they are just inventing themselves out of their own feelings." But as they saw it, the sense of an original voice, an original insight, is as we would see it, say, in a creative writing class today, was evidence that that person has discovered his or her genuine voice." Elaine Pagels sees in the Gnostics evidence that our creative endeavors are indeed one way in which we connect with and relate to the God of the Cosmos.

I know that I often seek the mysticism of a thin place, those moments of transcendence where we feel like we are part of something much more significant than ourselves. Sacred moments of creative love. We sense it in the work in our community--we feel it when the choir sings a powerful anthem-- or Robin shares a meaningful and beautiful poem as our morning prayer—or when she opens our eyes to a new interpretation—we know it when we do the next right thing. I believe we can look to Gnostic writings for clues about what the Holy One was up to in the first centuries after the Jesus event.

What can these early interpretations of the Jesus story show us today? I think they show us what happens when people of faith honestly wrestle with difficult spiritual questions. I also think it shows us the danger in using religion and spirituality as a means of political governance. Theocracy, in any form, is simply authoritarianism wrapped up in theological language. Listen carefully to the language being used right now in our political discourse—you will begin to hear more and more Theocratic language. It seems that book-burnings are coming back into fashion, as is censorship—I don't know if you've followed the travails of a local student at a Christian university here in town who had her senior project canceled because the Christian authorities didn't like the message her interpretations carried. She had to find an outside venue for her project. I find this extremely dangerous and one more sign on this highway to Theocracy—a road I believe we are on, but one that we can still turn around and head in a different direction.

Warnings against Theocracy are but one function of understanding the Gnostics (remember it was Theocratic authorities that destroyed them)—and Daniel Matt, a scholar of Kabbalah and Professor at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, asks this: "Why should anyone care about [esoteric wisdom—the wisdom of the Gnostics]? Because it challenges our understanding of God, and dares us to transform ourselves. It shatters childish theological images, and discovers a God called Infinity. God as Infinity then transforms [us]." One can begin to see why it was so important for the institutional church to shut down any opposing doctrines, dogmas, or theologies. We can't have all of these people out there trying to figure out this theology stuff, this God stuff, on their own. It's far too complicated and will lead to chaos. They might have a point—look at what happened after the Protestant Reformation—the cat is out of the bag, and there ain't no putting it back in. Theological interpretation is now the bedrock of the Protestant faith.

I will end my time this morning with a thought that keeps my faith fresh and alive and forward-looking: What other caves, filled with documents and relics from the earliest followers of Jesus, are out there waiting to be discovered? What new insights might be given to us as we seek to know better and live more fully the Ways of Jesus? What new prayers, hymns, sermons, and thoughts are sitting in a dark cave, ready for the light of the new morning to shine on them and reveal them again to the world. That keeps me going. The questions waiting to be asked of these new discoveries. May this congregation always ask good questions and always be prepared with open hearts and open minds for the revealing of the Holy One through a better understanding of our ancient faith. Amen

RESOURCES USED

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/gnostics.html>

<https://factsanddetails.com/world/cat55/sub352/entry-5784.html>

Elaine H. Pagels, The Harrington Spear Paine Foundation Professor of Religion Princeton University, Frontline, PBS, April 1998

Holy Bible, NRSV