THE GNOSTIC TEMPTATION

(Review article)

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It demands a rare combination of skills on the part of the historian to introduce a broad public to a field of current research. All the more so when this field may well be called ‘‘esoteric’’ in various senses of the word: the elucidation of doctrines which were already strange and secret in the distant past, then fell into oblivion, and were preserved in an obscure language, usually lies far from the layman’s common interest.

In her recent work on The Gnostic Gospels Professor Elaine Pagels of Barnard College indubitably shows great gifts for vulgarisation scientifique. The book—major portions of which also appeared in a series of articles in the New York Review of Books—won in 1979 the American National Book Award. Together with this honor, however, Pagels’ publication has brought her harsh criticism on the part of some distinguished colleagues, who have accused her (in one way or another) of disguised sensationalism. Unfortunately this polemic has sometimes taken an acrimonious tone which her thought-provoking book hardly deserves. Indeed The Gnostic Gospels, though in popular form, propounds some bold theses and suggests a new approach to problems which lie at the core of Gnostic scholarship today. These theses add much to the value of the book. As we shall see, however, they also raise some basic questions for the historian of religion.

First of all, it is to Pagels’ credit that she has presented us with a sustained attempt to give a sociological description of Gnosticism, or rather of those Gnostic trends which present close contacts with nascent and emerging Christianity. The nature and the paucity of the sources render such a task—the urgency of which was already underlined by the Messina international conference in 1966—extremely difficult. With great sensitivity Pagels, who describes her work as having grown ‘‘out of research into the relation between
politics and religion in the origins of Christianity” (p. ix), succeeds in unveiling sociological conditions or political attitudes implicit in theological conceptions of the “Gnostic Christians” (or “some of them”—Pagels does not always make it sufficiently clear which trends exactly she is referring to). These conditions and attitudes, according to her, implied a rejection of the institutions which early “orthodox” Christianity was in the process of developing in the second century.

Pagels adds—and this is probably the major thesis of the book—that this unveiling of social or political (i.e. “church-political”) attitudes is essential for a proper understanding of the Patristic anti-Gnostic polemics. In order to do so, she analyzes the implications of various issues upon which the Gnostics (mainly the Valentinians) opposed the Church Fathers. She thus deals with such issues as docetic attitudes toward the passion (and thus, ipso facto, the resurrection) of Christ, corresponding attitudes toward martyrdom, the idea of a church of the “elect” finding the way to God through self-knowledge, and therefore their rejection of ecclesiastical (and in particular episcopal) authority, or their description of the Divine Realm in terms of sexual roles with the related “liberated” attitude toward women.

Although Pagels’ arguments do not always carry conviction to the same degree, it is difficult to question the existence of a correlation between theological views and sociological attitudes, and the point she makes here should indeed be pondered by scholars. The way in which Pagels argues her main thesis, however, implies much more than such a correlation—and it is here that serious reservations need to be expressed. The overall picture which emerges from the book is not simply that of “political implications” of the religious debates between “orthodox” and “gnostic” Christians in the early Church (p. XXXVI). Rather, Pagels’ account tends to deny the essential and intrinsic seriousness of these theological debates, and to see them mainly as disguised struggles between divergent social or political conceptions. Moreover, the alleged socio-political divergences occasionally have little or no factual basis. In other words, it would seem that she has much overplayed her hand. Consequently, her description of the relationships between Gnosticism and the early Church is misleading on some