

Hidden Gospels

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Nag Hammadi documents have acquired an importance beyond their historical value.

I recently published the book, *Hidden Gospels: How the Quest for Jesus Lost Its Way* (Oxford University Press, 2001), which looks at the ancient gospels not found in the New Testament, works such as the Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Mary, and so on. There is nothing new about studying texts like these, but what my book tries to do is explore the importance of these works for contemporary religious thought. My argument is that these "hidden gospels" have acquired an importance far beyond their real historical value, and, in fact, they serve as the core texts for a full-fledged modern historical mythology.

The myth goes something like this. Once upon a time (we are told) there was the Jesus Movement, which was mystical, radical, feminist, egalitarian, and subversive. As time went by, this movement was destroyed by the rising forces of the Christian church, patriarchal and repressive. The earliest followers of Jesus found their ideas dismissed as "heresy" while the power-maniacs of the Great Church grabbed for themselves the grandiose title of "orthodox." The new world of Churchianity successfully covered its tracks by rewriting most early Christian documents and destroying those that revealed its Orwellian dirty tricks. However, some authentic relics survived in the form of the hidden gospels, which were preserved in the deserts of Egypt. In the twentieth century, these texts re-emerged to astonish the waiting world: We recall the discovery of the collection of ancient documents found at Nag Hammadi in 1945, popularized in Elaine Pagels' best-selling book *The Gnostic Gospels*. Since the 1970s, documents like the Gospel of Thomas have become a recurrent theme in popular culture, in many thriller novels, in the 1999 film *Stigmata*, and even in episodes of the *X-Files*. In addition, the existence of Thomas has stimulated much revisionist Biblical scholarship, notably that associated with the Jesus Seminar. We can even meet New Age believers who characterize themselves as "Thomas Christians" - the name refers to the Gospel of that name and not to the ancient Indian churches who claim St. Thomas their founder.

To see the lost gospels myth in operation, we might look at the film *Stigmata* itself. This work introduced many viewers to a bizarre religious underworld, which was presented as if it were, in fact, genuine. *Stigmata* tells the story of a Pittsburgh hairdresser who develops the bloody wounds of Christ. As if this were not enough, she also scrawls words that prove to be the Aramaic text of the "Jesus Gospel." This fictional text reports Jesus' words to his disciples at the Last Supper, and these same words were supposedly contained in a scroll found near the caves of the Dead Sea Scrolls. This work is cited as the one authentic gospel and thus "the most significant Christian relic ever found." The Jesus Gospel presents a Christianity very different from anything we know: God is a force within the individual believer, and thus church buildings and institutions are superfluous. The plot revolves around the efforts of the Roman Catholic hierarchy to suppress this gospel, through murder if necessary, in order to suppress its subversive message. Finally, the true gospel is revealed to the world through the heroism of a priest who defies his church. The film's epilogue explains that although the Jesus Gospel is fictitious, an authentically primitive gospel, the Gospel of Thomas was discovered in 1945, and, in fact, almost every word which the film attributes to Jesus comes from this text. The epilogue also notes that the Gospel of Thomas is still rejected by the Vatican even though scholars around the world acknowledge it as the "closest record we have of the

words of the historical Jesus.” This epilogue proved intriguing to many viewers, particularly Catholics, who wondered about the basis for such an explosive claim. A Catholic priest of my acquaintance complained that since the appearance of *Stigmata*, he had been besieged by students demanding to know what exactly the church had to hide.

I speak of the hidden gospels as a "myth." By this, I do not mean that the recently discovered texts are bogus or that they might not be of great interest to scholars of the ancient world. What disturbs me, and what led me to write this book, was not so much the texts as the extravagant uses to which they have been placed in contemporary culture. Indeed, the iconoclastic views of early Christianity so often proposed in recent years can be challenged in many ways, so many, in fact, that it is amazing that these ideas have achieved the wide credence they have. One basic problem is the claim that the hidden gospels contain a wealth of information that is new and incendiary. To the contrary, much of what was uncovered is not relevant to Christian origins, while what is relevant is not new, still less inflammatory. Many conservative scholars are thoroughly unconvinced by arguments for the revolutionary significance of the lost gospels, even for outstanding texts like *Thomas*.

Despite the claims of their advocates, the problems with taking the hidden gospels as historical sources are, or should be, self-evident. The idea that these documents have opened a window on the earliest days of Christianity stands or falls on whether they were written at a primitive stage in that story, and much depends on determining the dates at which these texts were written. The scholarly literature offers a very broad range of datings for these texts, but the consensus is that most of the works found at Nag Hammadi belong to the late second and third centuries. This is much later than the canonical gospels on which the Gnostic works can often be clearly shown to depend. While the Gnostic texts are still ancient, their value as independent sources of information is questionable, so that the canonical gospels really are both more ancient and authoritative than virtually all their rivals.

Far from being the alternative voices of Jesus' first followers, most of the lost gospels should rather be seen as the writings of much later dissidents who broke away from an already established orthodox church. This is not a particularly controversial statement, despite the impression that we may get from much more recent writing on the historical Jesus. The late character of the alternative texts is crucial to matters of historicity and reliability. Historical research is as good as the sources on which it relies, and to the extent that the latest quest for the historical Jesus is founded on the hidden gospels, that endeavor is fatally flawed.

For the same reasons of history and chronology, it is difficult to see the hidden gospels as blowing the whistle on the machinations of the early church or the relationship between orthodoxy and heresy. These texts depict a world of individualistic mystics and magi whose unfettered speculations are unconstrained by ecclesiastical structures, and it is common to suggest that this freewheeling situation represented a primitive reality which was ultimately destroyed by the emerging hierarchical church. But the institutional church was by no means an oppressive latecomer and was rather a very early manifestation of the Jesus movement. We have a good number of genuinely early documents of Christian antiquity from before 125, long before the hidden gospels were composed, and these give us a pretty consistent picture of a church which is already hierarchical and liturgical, which possesses an organized clergy, and which is very sensitive to matters of doctrinal orthodoxy. Just as the canonical gospels were in existence before their heterodox counterparts, so the orthodox church did precede the heretics, and by a comfortable margin. Despite all the recent discoveries, the traditional model of Christian history has a great deal more to recommend it than the revisionist accounts.

Nor are the "new" findings touted in recent years all that new. Contrary to some recent writings, the scholarly world did not flounder in ignorant darkness until illumination came from Nag Hammadi. Basic to the dramatic account of the rediscovered gospels is the idea that they restored to the world knowledge that had been lost for many centuries. At last, we are told, after 1,600 years, we finally hear the heretics speak for themselves. The problem with this approach is that many of the insights about early Christianity found in the lost texts had been known for many years before the Nag Hammadi discoveries and had, in fact, already penetrated a mass audience.

With few exceptions, modern scholars show little awareness of the very active debate about alternative Christianities which flourished in bygone decades so that we have a misleading impression that all the worthwhile scholarship has been produced within the last thirty years or so. To the contrary, much of the evidence needed to construct a radical revision of Christian origins had been available for many years prior to the 1970s, if not the 1870s. Through the nineteenth century, the idea that Gnostics might have kept alive the early truths of Jesus was familiar to critical religious thinkers, some on the far fringes of academe, others more respectable. And a century ago, people dreamed of finding actual documents to verify these theories.

Over the last two or three centuries, scholars and activists have periodically rediscovered the notion that the historical Jesus was a subversive individual mystic whose suppressed doctrine survived in the teachings of lost heresies and hidden gospels. Particularly between about 1880 and 1920, a cascade of new discoveries transformed attitudes to early Christianity, both the mainstream and the heretical fringes. The most exciting find involved portions of the Gospel of Thomas located in Egypt, then known simply as the Sayings of Jesus. Though the work did not have quite the revolutionary impact that it has on modern scholars, quotations from Thomas were appearing in works of popular piety long before the Nag Hammadi finds. And just as modern writers claim Thomas as a fifth gospel, so many experts a hundred years ago awarded a similar laurel to the recently found Gospel of Peter. Many of the insights and observations which have been based on the recently found Gnostic texts were also well-known before 1900. Even the special role of women disciples, which has attracted so much comment in recent years, was already being discussed in that epoch. The image of Jesus choosing Mary Magdalene as his especially beloved disciple runs through a large Gnostic work called the Pistis Sophia, which was available in a popular English translation as far back as 1896. The notion was quoted in feminist and New Age writings of the early twentieth century - and though this tends to be forgotten in modern writings, both feminists and New Age adherents wrote extensively on early Christianity in this period. Radical perspectives on religion were not an innovation of the 1960s. Far from being decently concealed in abstruse academic journals, the new speculations reached a mass audience through magazines, newspapers and novels. They were discussed in works by Frank Harris, D. H. Lawrence, George Moore and Robert Graves. These ideas were thoroughly familiar to any reasonably well-informed layperson.

But if the ideas were so familiar, why should there have been such an upsurge of interest and enthusiasm in the Gnostic gospels over the last twenty years? The most important change seems not to have been the new volume of information but a fundamental change of attitude among scholars and in the institutions in which they worked. The academic profession engaged in studying the Bible was transformed, above all by the influx of large numbers of women scholars, but also by the impact of postmodern and feminist theories. These changes had a revolutionary impact on attitudes to issues of canon and the nature of history and to movements once regarded as peripheral and heretical. Scholarship on Gnosticism and alternative Christianities now revived, after a period of some decades in which these ideas had fallen into disfavor, probably because the subject had been so overworked in earlier years. From the 1960s, the fringe movements suddenly returned to view as essential for understanding Christian origins. Once that transformation had occurred, new and existing materials were reinterpreted accordingly, and scholars re-examined texts and ideas with which they had long had a nodding acquaintance. The discovery of the non-canonical scriptures marks a change of perception and ideology rather than a balanced or objective response to a new corpus of evidence. As the cynical saying declares, "If I hadn't believed it, I wouldn't have seen it with my own eyes."

Despite its dubious sources and controversial methods, the new Jesus scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s gained such a following because it told a lay audience what it wanted to hear. The hidden gospels have been used to provide scriptural warrant for sweeping new interpretations of Jesus. Generally, the hidden gospels offer wonderful news for liberals, feminists, and radicals within the churches, who challenge what they view as outdated institutions and prejudices. And this is by no means true of the churches alone: since Christianity is such a fundamental component of western culture, any radical reinterpretation of the movement's core message is bound to reverberate through contemporary issues and debates.

The rediscovered texts help shift the whole ground of debate within the churches, permitting liberals to argue from their own distinctive version of the primitive gospel. Feminist scholars in particular note the central role which women play in texts like the Gospel of Mary, which is believed to show that women were apostles, leaders and teachers in the earliest Jesus movement: if this is the case, how can modern churches refuse to grant priestly authority to women today? Apart from the obvious appeal for women, the new portrait of Gnosticism is profoundly attractive for modern seekers, that large constituency interested in spirituality without the trappings of organized religion or dogma. For such an audience, texts like Thomas are so enticing because of their individualistic quality, their portrait of a Jesus who is a wisdom teacher rather than a Redeemer or heavenly Savior. Modern readers are drawn by the work's presentation of the mystical quest as a return to primal innocence, an idea that recalls the psychological quest for the inner child. Equally appealing for modern believers, the Jesus of the hidden gospels has many points of contact with the great spiritual traditions of Asia. This concept makes it vastly easier to promote dialogue with other great world religions and diminishes any uniquely Christian claims to divine revelation. Jesus thus becomes far more congenial to modern sensibilities about both gender and multiculturalism.

This Jesus meshes very well, indeed, with contemporary concerns, but the whole "hidden gospels" theme also echoes older traditions in American society, particularly its thoroughly Protestant assumptions. Even people reluctant to identify with historic orthodoxies still need the comfort of knowing that they are acting in the traditions of "real" Christianity and that there are genuine early Gospels, written texts, to validate these beliefs: Protestants have long been stirred by the dream of restoring the true church of the apostolic age. Also, quintessentially American is the distrust of external authorities like the clergy and the sense that through their affected learning, the priests have hidden the truth from the people. This was a key element in the anti-Catholic fears that blazed for so long in the nation's history. In the late twentieth century, such ideas spread quite widely among Catholics themselves, whose dissents over matters of authority and sexuality have so often put them in opposition to ecclesiastical hierarchies. Over the last century, the literature on hidden gospels, genuine and fraudulent, has been pervaded by conspiratorial speculations which suggest that some powerful body (usually the Roman Catholic church) is cynically plotting either to conceal the true gospel or to plant bogus documents to deceive the faithful.

Much contemporary discussion of the earliest church is laden with age-old, anti-Catholic rhetoric, with its imagery of power-hungry popes and book-burning prelates, set against heroic dissidents clinging to their scriptures of liberty. When contemporary accounts attack the oppressive ecclesiastical establishment in early Christianity, the writers seem motivated, at least in part, by these contemporary political concerns and stereotypes, which are read back into the first centuries. Conversely, many of these scholars openly identify with the Gnostics and other sectarians who resisted the Great Church: in our own age, at least, the title of heretic is an honorable one.

Ironically, the liberal emphasis on restoring the presumed "early Christianity" by means of its authoritative texts bears a strong resemblance to traditional fundamentalist approaches, which are instead based on the canonical scriptures. The whole issue of canons is critical here. Post-modern thought holds that no text should be privileged or authoritative, as each reflects the ideological stance of a particular hegemonic group. Scholars claim a duty to challenge the received canon of approved and valued texts, whether in literature or in religion. Radical critics seek to dethrone the canonical authority of the New Testament, yet in a way which substitutes an alternative range of scriptural authorities. Though these new texts are more acceptable to current tastes, they are still treated with the same kind of veneration once reserved for the Bible. Particularly with some of the feminist approaches to texts like Mary, we will find what can only be described as a kind of inverted fundamentalism, a loving consecration of the non-canonical.

We can, therefore, see that *Stigmata* belongs to a well-established and thriving genre, and it is by no means alone among recent productions. One fascinating parallel is found in the X-Files episode entitled "Hollywood AD," broadcast not too long after *Stigmata* was released. The story, written by series star David Duchovny himself, tells of the finding of a hidden gospel that reveals a sexual relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. The owner of the gospel is one Micah Hoffman, who is blackmailing a Catholic cardinal in order to keep it from the public. The Cardinal, O'Fallon, is a key leader of the

American church, who is reputedly in line for the papacy. As in *Stigmata*, the church is prepared to kill to achieve its goals, and O'Fallon murders Hoffman, who proves to have forged the text, rather than discovered it. The cardinal then kills himself. The heavy symbolism is groaningly clear: the cardinal is Judas, the forger is Christ.

There is an interesting twist to this story, namely, that in a sense this story is perfectly true. It did happen but with certain key differences. What we have here is a version of the story of Mark Hoffman, rather than Micah. Mark was a Utah-based documents dealer with a unique knack for finding (and forging) rare Mormon historical treasures. In the 1980s, he found a real gem, the "Salamander Letter," an early account of the revelations to Joseph Smith, which supposedly showed that Smith was far deeper into occult and magical practices than anyone had been able to prove hitherto. It was a forgery but good enough to allow Hoffman to blackmail the church hierarchy of the Latter Day Saints, who dreaded the exposure of such an embarrassing text. In real life, the church did not try to kill the forger, but Hoffman himself killed a number of people in an effort to throw police off his trail. The real Mark Hoffman - like the fictional Micah - tried to cover his tracks by a series of bombings, which is what ultimately brought him to the attention of law enforcement.

But now we face a fascinating question: Why did the fictional presentation – why, in short, did David Duchovny – choose to make this a Catholic horror story rather than a Mormon one? Well, Catholics are much better known and probably have more enemies prepared to believe stories like this. But there is another more basic factor at work here, namely, that the whole hidden gospels theme is just profoundly anti-Catholic at its core. It appeals to the millions of people who believe that the church has been sitting on the secrets of true Christianity for two thousand years and that someday, truth will out. In other words, the idea of hidden gospels is very congenial to the Protestantism upon which American culture is built. However modern or post-modern the guise - however many *Smashing Pumpkins* songs appear on the soundtrack – *Stigmata* is dealing with a basic component of American Protestant mythology.

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