

## **The Gnostics**

### **An Interview with Agnes Cunningham, S.S.C.M.**

**Fr. Baima:** Good morning, greetings from Mundelein Seminary. Today we are going to continue our discussion of the issues that are all around the news about Gnosticism, the Jesus Code, [the Lost Gospels] & *the DaVinci Code*.

We want to examine the early Christian literature that is being discussed in various news magazines and articles. To help us do this today, I have invited Sister Agnes Cunningham to be our guest on *Speaking of Theology*. Sister Agnes is a member of the Sisters of the Holy Heart of Mary and is currently the superior of the Holy Heart of Mary Convent in Champaign, IL. She is professor emeritus of historical and systematic theology at the University of Saint Mary of the Lake. Sister Agnes was the first woman president of the Catholic Theological Society of America. Her doctorate is from the *Institut Catholique de Lyon*. Sister Agnes, welcome to *Speaking of Theology*.

**Sister Agnes:** Well, thank you Fr. Thomas Baima, it is very good to be with you this morning.

**Fr. Baima:** I will have to confess to our listeners, Sister Agnes was one of my teachers when I was a graduate student at USML a few years ago.

**Sister Agnes:** He is one of my claims to fame.

**Fr. Baima:** Well, let's jump right into the questions. [A] few weeks ago now, both *US News and World Report* and *Time* magazine carried cover stories on this phenomenon that has been going all through the news about the rediscovery of ancient Christian literature.<sup>1</sup> Titled under "the lost Gospels" or the "Jesus Code" were the two different cover stories. So, what I thought would be helpful to our listeners this morning is to talk a little bit about this literature. Maybe we could start with a survey of the early Christian literature. The writings that are mentioned the most often in these news stories are these so called "lost" gospels. What are the lost gospels and where do they come from?

**Sister Agnes:** Well, Fr. Tom, before I answer that question, I would like to give a brief summary of two reactions to that article. The first is that I wonder how many people who had read that article had read the review of Ehrman's other book, *Lost Scriptures: Books that did not make it into the New Testament*.<sup>2</sup> That was carried in the *America* magazine December 22-December 29 and the review of the book was written by Fr. Daniel J. Harrington who is a professor of New Testament in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the Weston School of Theology and editor of *New Testament Abstracts*. And I think that Fr. Harrington's reading of that book and his assessment of it gives a good compliment and balance to the article in *Time*.<sup>3</sup>

**Fr. Baima:** Why don't you give us a quick summary of Fr. Harrington's survey of the books.

**Sister Agnes:** What he does is contrast what Professor Ehrman said in *Lost Christianities* to what is said in *Lost Scriptures*. In the *Lost Scriptures*, Ehrman includes text. In fact, Fr. Harrington says, that book is almost an anthology of translations of 43

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<sup>1</sup> For the context of this program, see David van Biema, "The Lost Gospels" in *Time Magazine*, December 22, 2003. See also Linda Kulman and Jay Tolson, "Jesus in America" in *U. S. News and World Report*, December 22, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It Into The New Testament* (New York: Oxford Univeresity Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, "A Clash of Ideas and Beliefs": Review of *Lost Scriptures: The Books That Didn't Make It Into the New Testament* and *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scriptures and Faiths We Never Knew*, by Bart D. Ehrman in *America Magazine*, December 22, 2003.

texts from not only the Gnostic Gospel but the Apocryphal Gospel and other kinds of writings that did emerge in the very exciting interesting time of the early Christian Church. What Harrington says is that you have to balance off Ehrman's claim for what he calls the "movement of Proto Orthodoxy," where the church is suppose to have suppressed and hidden so many of these non-canonical texts, and the actual complicated and unsettled evolution that was going on in Christianity in those early centuries. So, that's just a very thumbnail sketch. The second reaction was that I remember when I was a little girl, a freshman in high school; someone gave me a copy of these supposed lost gospels. When I was a young sister teaching high-school at the age of 20 or 30-something, somebody gave me another copy. So, this is not a new phenomenon claiming that they have been suppressed until the year 2003. These texts keep emerging. One of the reasons these supposed or alleged lost gospels did emerge or were not suppressed is that so many of the other writers in those early Christian centuries the period of what we call the period of Christian antiquity were quoting this material so they could contrast it with the teachings that were coming from the Great Tradition. I think every 25-30 years there is a "new" rediscovery of these lost gospels.

**Fr. Baima:** I was talking with some women after a lecture I had given in a parish and they had all read *the DaVinci Code* and they were really quite intrigued. They said they had never heard anything about these books. I said to one of them, "would you like to see these texts? We have them in the library." And that astonished her because she had gotten the impression from the popular reporting that somehow that just 6 or 7 weeks ago there had been this great earth-shattering discovery that no one had known about for 2000 years. So, I said, "You can go to the library and you can take it out and read it. They have been translated for many years." This was quite stunning to her, to learn that the books weren't as secret or newly discovered as it was presented in the popular press.

**Sister Agnes:** To give some context to your listeners, the time we are talking about, that period of early Christianity, begins shortly after A.D. 96 and runs through the middle end of the fourth century, although we do find, even in the later fourth century, some of

the great Greek Fathers of the Church writing about the Gnostic gospels even in that period.

The Apocryphal gospels were also coming to the fore and many of them were not Gnostic. If we try to resituate ourselves into the very exciting period, after the death of Jesus and the last Apostle, when the Christian community was trying to deal with the great mysteries of Trinity and incarnation and redemption and all those other wonderful foundational truths of our Catholic faith, nothing was said or settled. There was a great deal of searching going on. The Apostolic Tradition was there, the gospels were being proclaimed orally and then being written; Paul's epistles and writings were available to people and there were a number of debates going on. The thinkers, the leaders, the bishops, the theologians were trying to find ways of expressing the mysteries, particularly of the incarnation (the mystery of God made man), Jesus, who was human and divine. They were trying to find ways of expressing these truths, in ways that would make sense to intelligent groups of the day.

**Fr. Baima:** Sister Agnes, we were talking about the formation of early Christian literature. Again, to put some dates on it, the traditional date of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus is A.D. 33. The apostles go out after that time. They proclaim the gospel. They form Christian communities. But the transmission of Jesus' teaching was essentially oral. In the 50's give or take, St. Paul begins to write letters to the various church's which he's founded. Then in the 70's and 80's you have the Evangelists beginning to put down in written form, the gospel accounts which we come to know as the four gospels. Then, this period of early Christian literature really begins with the death of the last apostle traditionally dated as around A.D. 100 with the death of Saint John. Do I have that historical sequence correct?

**Sister Agnes:** Yes. That's exactly the way it was, Fr. Thomas. At the same time, that there were emerging wonderfully rich theological text and searching's to find ways of speaking of the great mysteries, there were the people who didn't know Egyptian mythology and Jewish cabala and Oriental theosophy and Greek philosophy. They

were asking the same questions. What did it mean that we can say God is one? So, you find texts coming from people who do not use their own names as authors on the text but ascribe them to Paul or Peter or Thomas or Philip or one of the other apostles even to Mary or Joseph and they try to answer questions. What did it mean for Jesus to be human? What did it mean for Jesus to be divine? These were attempts to nourish the devotion to what we would call the simple Christian people who were not dealing with the more profound aspects of Christian faith. It's out of that turmoil and searching that these so-called lost gospels emerge. We have them in the apocryphal gospels; we have them in the Gnostic writings. The Gnostic writings, though, seem to come from a more intellectually astute and insightful level.

**Fr. Baima:** Let's take a few minutes, then, on the article in *Time* magazine, which mentions four early communities that produced some of this literature. Let's talk about each of these four. The first one that the article mentions is a group called the Ebonites.

**Sister Agnes:** The Ebonites represent one of the tensions in early Christianity. In other words, how are people who have been Jewish people and converted to Christianity going to maintain what they feel they must do to be faithful to the long tradition (Judaism) that has brought them to a new insight of faith and still be Christians? We find them trying to be "Jewish Christians" so to speak or "Christian Jews." In some instances, what they do is bring into their teachings the kind of merger/mixer of both Jewish faith and belief in practice and Christian belief and practice. In the attempt to do it, they are not successful in staying faithful to that apostolic tradition.

**Fr. Baima:** A different response to the very same tension would be the Marcionites. In their struggle, they come up with the exact opposite answer?

**Sister Agnes:** Exactly. That happens so often with these alternative Christianities or complimentary Christianities. So often, one is a reaction not to the main line of Christian life and thought but to an opposing Christianity that seems to strike at the

roots of what the new group is talking about. Because the Marcionites wanted nothing to do with Judaism, their answer was to suppress the Old Testament. They tried to set up the idea that the Jewish God was one of anger and stern justice and it was only in trying to follow the new way of Jesus that a person could really come to see what Christianity was about.

**Fr. Baima:** Now, in a certain sense, both of these groups are dealing with the tension that was addressed by the canonical Gospel of Matthew. Would that be fair to say that Matthew really looks at the Jewishness of Christianity and provides the apostolic tradition's presentation on that question?

**Sister Agnes:** Yes, that is exactly so. We do find evidences at this period of so-called scriptures or real scriptures that emerge where anything that seems to downplay or seems to be a criticism of the Jewish tradition is extricated. On the other hand anything that condemns Judaism is taken out or, in other instances anything that condemns Judaism is left in.

**Fr. Baima:** So, a kind of over emphasis takes place. Here are some things which are important for our listeners to understand. The Canonical gospels (which are those that are listed in the New Testament) are each written in response to a pastoral situation that that particular apostle or evangelist was trying to address for his community. Matthew was addressing this question of the Jewish origins of Christianity. But there were other groups as well. The Gnostics and the Thomaites. Say a little bit about those two groups.

**Sister Agnes:** Well actually, Fr. Thomas, the Gnostics are perceived as being the most dangerous of all these groups, because Gnosticism was a very subtle system. It subtly appealed to persons who were intellectuals, who were truly seeking a spiritual way, who were asking; how do we know the answers to all these difficulties. They were asking sincere questions that we still ask today. What is the origin of the world, of evil, of the end of the world? How does heaven relate to the earth? How does spirit relate to

matter? Gnosticism was dangerous not so much because there were so many errors in it but because there were so many grains of truth.

**Fr. Baima:** That's usually the situation with heresy. You said many times that the real danger in these other movements in early Christianity was not that they were completely false but that they had taken elements of the truth and turned them and twisted them into falsehood.

**Sister Agnes:** Yes, and in the doing, they offered a very attractive refuge from the simplicity of the gospel, from the demands of Christian discipleship and from the Church's commitment to serve the poor and proclaim the gospel. Because in the Gnostic sects, you didn't have to do those things; all you had to do was to know and to possess secret knowledge. That secret knowledge would use terms that were found in the Canonical New Testament but change the meaning. One example is the term "gnosis" itself. Gnosis is the Greek word for knowledge. It is a major concept used by Saint Paul. When Paul uses the term, he means the knowledge of Jesus Christ, true God and true man; the knowledge of the Father of Jesus revealed in the message of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. This was the public revelation. But that was not at all what the Gnostics would say "gnosis" was. For them it was secret knowledge. One of the other dangers in Gnosticism was very subtly expressed in the denial of universal salvation. The Gnostics identified those people who would surely be saved and those people who surely would be damned to hell and some who might be saved if they turned their lives around sought secret knowledge and followed one of the Gnostics schools could perhaps achieve a kind of salvation. It is this attitude that we find when we look into Gnosticism and the Gnostic teachers. I've been surprised too that no where in the reading I've done about the present discussion and debate that is going on is there any mention of the great Clement of Alexandria who tried himself to take what he saw as the best of Gnosticism and to construct what he truly called a Christian Gnosticism. Nobody seems to have heard of dear Clement. I think he is one of the lost writers.

**Fr. Baima:** And one of the really great writers of Christian history.

**Sister Agnes:** And one of the early true scholars and humanists.

**Fr. Baima:** I mentioned earlier about the Ebonites and Marcionites being an alternative to the Gospel of Matthew on the question of Christian origins and Judaism. In another sense, the Gospel of John and the First Letter of John really are responses to the Gnostic issues that were current at his time.

**Sister Agnes:** Yes, and you know Fr. Thomas, because of that very focus in those writings, there are evidences that some early Christians, (non-Catholic Christians) for many years would not accept those writings in their bible because they identified John as a Gnostic. They felt that because he was using terms and expressions similar to the Gnostics that he himself was a Gnostic. That is a whole other twist on this discussion that is usually not well known.

**Fr. Baima:** I want to shift gears quickly because we are coming to the end of the program. In the *Time* Magazine article there was a pull quote, which said many people who have left the church and some that are still in it are looking for another way of being Christian. This goes back, Sister Agnes, to what you said earlier, about how the Gnostics and other heretical groups were not *completely* wrong, that they had taken an element of the truth and then exploited it. Let's assume the pastoral question, there are people who are looking for spirituality. They are looking to have spiritual needs met, but they're not finding it in the ordinary Church practice right now. What would you suggest to them? If they find themselves attracted to this alternative text, what would you suggest for them within the Catholic Tradition?

**Sister Agnes:** We have a wonderful tradition of spirituality and mysticism in the Catholic Church. Many of these authors are not nearly as well known as they ought to be. But happily and fortunately there are more and more editions, new translations and

volumes & books that are coming out.<sup>4</sup> There is a whole little series on 30 days with a spiritual master. And some of the great spiritual pioneers, you might even say, the pioneers of the spirit, who have searched out these yearnings of the human heart and have suggested ways that they have found helpful in deepening their prayer life and establishing a closer knowledge and relationship with God. The key of Catholic spirituality is coming to know Jesus is the center of your life.

**Fr. Baima:** We're going to have to come to the end here. I want to thank Sister Agnes Cunningham for spending the time with us today to talk about early Christian literature. *Speaking of Theology* is a monthly program brought to you by the faculty of University of Saint Mary of the Lake, Mundelein Seminary. We're very grateful to the Archdiocese of Chicago for providing this spot in *Catholic Community of Faith* radio series for us to explore the Catholic intellectual life. If you would like to contact the show you can do that on the Archdiocese of Chicago's webpage, [www.archchicago.org](http://www.archchicago.org) Until next time, I'm Father Tom Baima and this has been *Speaking of Theology*.

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<sup>4</sup> One such series is the *Classics of Western Spirituality* published by Paulist Press.