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Title: Hallowed Secularism and Current Approaches to Gnosticism

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6/29/2007--I have been warned that Gnosticism is an enormously complex phenomenon that I frankly do not understand well enough to comment on. Fair enough. But I would like to note three aspects of the recent work of Elaine Pagels (The Gnostic Gospels and Reading Judas and much else): the political choice of the canon, the seeking of God within and the role of spirit versus body. As to politics, a review of Pagels on Amazon states, "Pagels argues that Christian orthodoxy grew out of the political considerations of the day, serving to legitimize and consolidate early church leadership." I'm sure this is fair because of the criticism she makes in Reading Judas, that is, the Gospel of Judas, that it represents a dissent against the "single, static universal system of beliefs" of official early Christianity. This view by Pagels made a tremendous impression on a character in City of God: "It was all politics, wasn't it?" she asks me. "...Yes, I sez to her. ...So it's all made up, it's an invention. ...Yes, I sez, ...[a]nd you know for the longest time, it actually worked." But the mistake here made by Doctorow—well, by Pem—is to imagine that in human history, the Holy Spirit is not at work. Doesn't God work in history? Or, if you prefer, doesn't history have a shape? History looks like mere contingency and will but it isn't. Slavery could not have endured, as Jefferson saw. I will have to return to the themes of inner and outer and the role of the body.