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July 1, 2007: Hallowed Secularism and Current Approaches to Gnosticism--part 2

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7/1/2007--In the last blog, I said I would return to two other themes of the current interest in Gnosticism. The prior blog concerned the politics by which the canon of the Bible was set. The struggle over what books to include should not be viewed as mere power politics, as Elaine Pagels suggests, but may reflect the deep working of the divine spirit in history. Pagels also suggests that believers should be encouraged to look for God within themselves, without churches or clergy. This is more or less a quote from her new book, with Karen King, *Reading Judas, The Gospel of Judas*. There are two themes here, one of the God within and the other, anti-church hierarchy. As for the first, given human indifference, violence and hatred, what reason do we have to believe that the divine spirit lies within human beings? Something like grace touches us, sometimes, to be sure, but we are at least a battlefield of good and evil. Pagels would lead us to see ourselves as divine, which is partly what the Bible attempts to turn us from. As for the second point, concerning hierarchy, Pagels seems to have the typical liberal antipathy for the Catholic Church. I think we can all learn a lot from what Pope Benedict has been writing and saying. Authority that comes from the speaker rather than the role is not tyrannical. The other and deeper Gnostic theme is that, as Pagels explains, Gnostic Christians rejected the Jewish Christian, and later Orthodox, position of the resurrection of the body. Gnostic Christians believed that eternal life is lived through the spirit alone and that Jesus was not reborn in the flesh. This is not an esoteric debate, for in this Gnosticism the body and the world are suspect. Christianity has always had this Gnostic tendency, as the emphasis on heaven shows, and it is this very tendency, championed by Pagels and others, that has helped lead to the environmental crisis of today by denigrating this material home of ours. The Bible, in contrast, is earth not heaven. The Kingdom is here and among us. This is the only home we have and we are charged to live well in it.