

Elaine Pagels

Religion Scholar ▪
Professor, Princeton



Profile

Elaine Pagels

Religion scholar and bestselling author Elaine Pagels is a preeminent figure in the theological community. She forever changed our understanding of Christianity by exploding the myth of the early Church as a unified movement.

Pagels is the [Harrington Spear Paine Professor of Religion](#) at Princeton University where she has taught since 1982. The recipient of Rockefeller, Guggenheim, and MacArthur Fellowships, her impressive body of work has earned international acclaim.

As a young researcher at Barnard College, Pagels' groundbreaking findings were published in her signature text, *The Gnostic Gospels*. Considered one of the best books of the 20th century by Modern Library, the bestselling *The Gnostic Gospels* analyzed 52 early Christian manuscripts unearthed in Egypt, winning both the National Book Critic's Circle Award and National Book Award. *The New York Times* called it "The first major and eminently readable book on Gnosticism benefiting from the discovery in 1945 of a collection of Gnostic Christian texts at Nag Hammadi in Egypt."

The New York Times Best Seller and Editors' Choice [Revelations: Visions, Prophecy and Politics in the Book of Revelation](#) explores the New Testament Book of Revelation. Pagels analyzes John of Patmos' Book of Revelation along with similar Jewish, Christian, and Pagan books written around the same time. She considers Patmos' Book of Revelation as wartime literature, investigating the theory that throughout history the powerful have sought to force "God's enemies" to submit or face death.

Her next book, *Why Religion?*, uses her own life as a case study to rethink our connection to the spiritual dimension of the human experience. The book is slated for a 2018 release.

Pagels is also the author of *The Origins of Satan*, which chronicles the evolution of Jewish and Christian concepts of evil. Her other books include *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* and *The New York Times* best seller, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*.

She has written numerous scholarly articles and book reviews and has been profiled by *TIME*, *The Atlantic*, *Vogue*, *The New Yorker* and appeared in *Newsweek's* issue on "Women and Power." Possessing a working command of Greek, Latin, German, Hebrew, French, Italian, and Coptic, Pagels holds her BA and MA from Stanford University and PhD in Religion from Harvard.

Audience Comments

Elaine Pagels

“Elaine Pagels is one of the smartest, warmest, and most engaging speakers we have had. She held a standing room only crowd mesmerized as she wound her way through the history of the early Christianity. She reminded everyone why history, and especially the history of religion, is so important. She invited you in to the academic debates over the meaning of these formative texts and made you feel like you were in the room with her trying to figure out their meaning; she made you feel like you were part of the process of research and discovery.”

Arizona State University

“She presents even the most esoteric material in a fashion accessible to those who know nothing of her subject: a gift few scholars possess. She possesses them all in abundance.”

Yale Law School

“We had a packed house, around 550 persons - and it was a wonderful experience for them to share her scholarship on The Gnostic Gospel.”

Trinity College

“Sensational! An overflow crowd - people were sitting in the aisles, the pit and in the back of the hall. She was wonderful about answering questions. Kind, gracious and absolutely great!”

Kenyon College

“I thought I would just send a quick message to say what a wonderful speaker Elaine Pagels is. She drew well over 300 people last night, which, for our small college, is quite good. The Social Room was filled, and Dr. Pagels gave a fascinating (and very active) talk.”

Daemen College

Suggested Topics

Elaine Pagels

Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation

Beyond Belief: A Different View of Christianity

The Discovery of Gnostic Gospels: New Views of Jesus & His Message

The Origin of Satan, the Nature of Evil

What Happened to God the Mother: Gender Roles and Images of the Divine in Western Religious Traditions

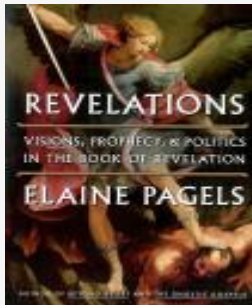
Areas of Interest and Expertise:

Bible	Catholicism	Christianity
Education	Ethics	Faith
History	Interfaith	Non-Fiction Writers
Religion	Residencies	Spirituality
Values	Women	



In Print

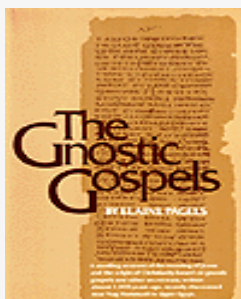
Elaine Pagels



Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation

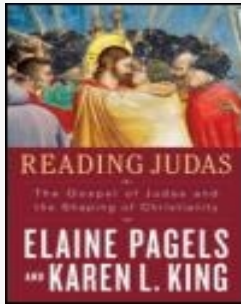
In this startling and timely book, Pagels returns The Book of Revelation to its historical origin, written as its author John of Patmos took aim at the Roman Empire after what is now known as “the Jewish War,” in 66 CE. Militant Jews in Jerusalem, fired with religious fervor, waged an all-out war against Rome’s occupation of Judea and their defeat resulted in the desecration of Jerusalem and its Great Temple. Pagels persuasively interprets Revelation as a scathing attack on the decadence of Rome. Soon after, however, a new sect known as “Christians” seized on John’s text as a weapon against heresy and infidels of all kinds—Jews, even Christians who dissented from their increasingly rigid doctrines and hierarchies. In a time when global religious violence surges, *Revelations* explores how often those in power throughout history have sought to force “God’s enemies” to submit or be killed. It is sure to appeal to Pagels’s committed readers and bring her a whole new audience who want to understand the roots of dissent, violence, and division in the world’s religions, and to appreciate the lasting appeal of this extraordinary text.

(Source: Viking Books)



The Gnostic Gospels

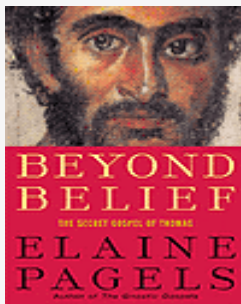
The Gnostic Gospel is a provocative study of the gnostic gospels and the world of early Christianity as revealed through the Nag Hammadi texts.



Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity

When the *Gospel of Judas* was published by the National Geographic Society in April 2006, it received extraordinary media attention and was immediately heralded as a major biblical discovery that rocked the world of scholars and laypeople alike. Elaine Pagels and Karen King are the first celebrated scholars to reflect on this newfound text and its ramifications for telling the story of early Christianity. In *Reading Judas*, they illustrate how the newly discovered text provides a window onto understanding how Jesus' followers understood his death, why Judas betrayed Jesus, and why God allowed it. Presented with the elegance, insight, and accessibility that has made Pagels and King the leading voices in this field, this is a book for academics and popular audiences alike. A *New York Times* bestseller by Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King.

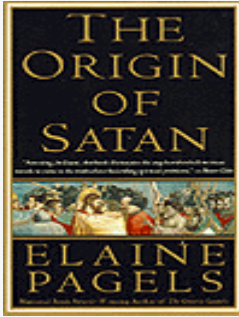
(Source: Viking Books)



Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas

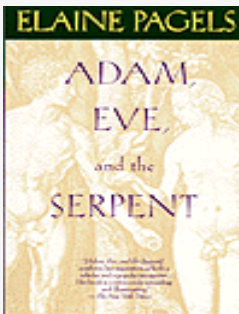
Beyond Belief explores how Christianity began by tracing its earliest texts, rediscovered in Egypt in 1945. The astonishing discovery of the Gospel of Thomas shows how Christian leaders chose to include some gospels and exclude others from the collection we have come to know as the New Testament. Drawing on her own scholarship and that of an international group of scholars, Pagels shows that traditions embodied in Judaism and Christianity can powerfully affect us in the heart, mind, and spirit. Provocative, beautifully written, and moving, *Beyond Belief*, the most personal of Pagels's books to date, shows how "the impulse to seek God overflows the narrow banks of a single tradition."

(Source: back cover, Random House)



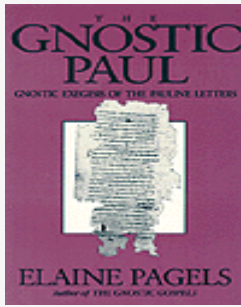
The Origin of Satan

The Origin of Satan is a study of the role of the devil in biblical and modern times theorizes that dissident social groups that resisted Christianity, such as pagans and Jews, were typically portrayed as demons and therefore established as threats.



Adam, Eve, and the Serpent

Adam, Eve and the Serpent, deepens and refreshes our view of early Christianity while casting a disturbing light on the evolution of the attitudes passed down to us. Elaine Pagels examines how the founders of the Christian church permanently revolutionized the meaning of sexuality.



The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters

In this landmark work, Elaine Pagels demonstrates how evidence of gnostic sources may challenge the long-established assumption that Paul writes his letters to combat "gnostic opponents" and to repudiate their claims to secret wisdom. It demonstrates how gnostic writers not only failed to grasp the whole point of Paul's writings, but dared to claim his letters as a primary source for their anthropology, Christology and sacramental theology.

Biography

Elaine Pagels

Growing up in a family of scientists, Elaine Pagels was taught that scientific discovery had made religion obsolete and irrelevant. Despite this early training — or perhaps because of it — Pagels, the Harrington Spear Paine Professor of Religion at Princeton University, is now one of the country's leading scholars of religion.

An intensely inquisitive and thorough historian, Pagels' impeccable scholarship has won her international respect. As a young researcher at Barnard College, she changed forever the historical landscape of the Christian religion by exploding the myth of the early Christian Church as a unified movement.

Her findings were published in the bestselling book, *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979, Random House), an analysis of 52 early Christian manuscripts that were unearthed in Egypt in 1945. Known collectively as the Nag Hammadi Library, the manuscripts demonstrate that the early Christian movement was far more diverse than previously thought. They also indicate how women, prominent in certain Christian groups, were subsequently excluded from governing positions in its emerging hierarchy. As the early church moved toward becoming an orthodox body with a canon, rites and clergy, the Nag Hammadi manuscripts were suppressed and deemed heretical.

Expanding on questions raised in *The Gnostic Gospels*, Pagels wrote *Adam, Eve and the Serpent* (1988, Random House), a book that explores the Genesis creation stories and their role in the development of sexual attitudes in the Christian West — as well as the conviction, fundamental to American political life, that "all men are created equal."

Pagels wrote *The Origin of Satan* (1995, Random House) after two tragic events in her life, the 1987 death of her six-year-old son Mark to a respiratory disease and the 1988 death of her husband of 20 years, physicist Heinz Pagels, in a rock climbing accident. Pagels says that following these events, like many people who grieve, she had a sense of living with invisible presences. The book is a culmination of her reflections on the many ways that various religions have given imaginative form to what is invisible. She sketches the development of Jewish and Christian perceptions of evil. She also points out a clear connection between the primarily western view of the world as a battleground between supernatural forces of good and evil, and the tendency of certain groups — both Christian and Muslim — to demonize others. This tendency, observes Pagels, resulted in "some very human tragedies." She adds, "[Demonization] is a cultural habit we can no longer afford."

In her *New York Times* bestseller *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, Pagels focuses on religious claims to possessing the ultimate "truth." She contends that, as Christianity became increasingly institutionalized, it became more politicized and less pluralistic. Says Pagels, "I'm advocating, on some level, the inclusion of [religious texts] that were considered blasphemous. I suggest that there are ways of embracing a far wider spectrum of religious diversity within Christianity and quite beyond Christianity."

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Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity (March 2007), is also a *New York Times* bestseller. Co-authored with fellow scholar Karen King, the book is the first to illustrate how the newly discovered Gospel of Judas provides a window onto understanding how Jesus' followers understood his death, why Judas betrayed Jesus, and why God allowed it.

Elaine Pagels earned a B.A. in history and an M.A. in classical studies from Stanford University. In 1970 she earned a Ph.D. with distinction from Harvard University. Pagels has taught at Barnard College, Columbia University, and currently is Harrington Spear Paine Professor of Religion at Princeton University.

In 1981 Pagels was awarded a Mac Arthur fellowship. She has written numerous articles of scholarship and a number of book reviews. Her book, *The Gnostic Gospels*, won both the National Book Critics Circle Award and the National Book Award. It was also chosen by the Modern Library as one of the 100 best books of the 20th Century.

She has also been profiled in such national publications as *TIME*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Vogue*, *Mirabella*, *The New York Times Magazine* and *The New Yorker*. In February 1997, Pagels was named one of the 25 Most Influential Working Mothers by *Working Mother* magazine. In 2003 she was a featured commentator on the ABC's special program, "Jesus. Mary and Da Vinci."

Elaine Pagels lives in Princeton, New Jersey.