

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Faith, grief, struggle and renewal: A personal journey



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"I grew up among people who regarded religion as obsolete as an outgrown bicycle stashed in a back closet."

So writes Elaine Pagels in the introduction to her latest book, "Why Religion? A Personal Story." It is indeed the personal story of a historian who asks, "Why is religion still around in the twenty-first century?" She further explains how this question became "intensely personal," especially following the death of her young child, followed soon after by the "shocking" death of her husband. It left her a "crater that loomed as large as the Grand Canyon ... like a black hole in space." Her personal journey leading up to becoming one of America's premier scholars of religion is fascinating, and I'm excited that she will be in Grand Rapids this October.

Pagels grew up with secular parents, her father a distinguished scientist, in Palo Alto, California, in an environment she describes as "living inside a giant marshmallow, the hard edges — race, poverty, crime — covered with soft, sugary pillows; a place where people go to hide from whatever they want to avoid."

At age 15, she was drawn to a Billy Graham Crusade, where she felt she was offered a new life by being "born again." She writes, "I could break out of my family and enter into the family of a heavenly father ... who knew everything about me, even my secret thoughts — yet loved me unconditionally." Her parents were "horrified," she writes, as she got involved with an evangelical church while at the same time her high school friends became "another kind of family — more raucous, playful and daring."

This latter group included the young musician Jerry Garcia, and a good friend, Paul, a high school dropout painter. She continued to be active weekly in the evangelical church, when her friend Paul died in a car crash. Her Christian friends, at first sympathetic, asked "Was he born again?" When Pagels said no, he was Jewish, their immediate response was, "Then he's in hell." This response was not what had drawn her to the church, nor was it what she understood from what Billy Graham said about "God's love for everyone." She writes, "These people were like a club for people spiritually superior to everyone who didn't share their beliefs. Numb, devastated and alone, I left the church, and never went back."

She now reflects, "Paul's death had opened up huge questions for all of us — that quick, vivid life suddenly stopped. Where do the dead go? And how to go on living, alert to death's presence, its inevitability?"

Torn between interests in dance, art history, philosophy, and English literature, she finally chose to enter Harvard University's doctoral program in religion studies, offering her the opportunity to study Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. Her questions persisted: "hadn't Nietzsche pronounced God dead a century ago?" But her own experience led her to ask why was her "encounter with evangelical Christianity so powerfully compelling? Was it Christianity, or could any religious tradition evoke such response?"

While no longer seeing herself as Christian, she wondered, "Who was Jesus? How did the unlikely story of a rural rabbi who preached that the world was coming to an end and God's kingdom was coming ... and (was) killed by his enemies, ever become the basis for a worldwide movement still spreading two thousand years later?"

In an interview with New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl at Harvard, she was asked, "So really, why did you come here?" She responded mumbling something about "wanting to find the essence of Christianity." Stendahl countered, "How do you know it has an essence?" She then knew immediately she was at the right place when "asked a question like that — challenged to rethink everything."

If you go

What: Book discussion group on Elaine Pagels' "Why Religion? A Personal Story"

When: 3-4:30 p.m. alternate Tuesdays, beginning Sept. 10

Where: 3001 Seidman Center, 50 Front Ave. SW, Grand Rapids

For more information and a parking pass, email interfaith@gvsu.edu

Soon she was introduced to a collection of early Christian documents that had been suppressed and mostly destroyed by the church establishment. In 1945, the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in Egypt opened a whole new understanding of the early developments in the Christian communities. Similar to the Dead Sea Scrolls found two years later, these documents hidden for nearly 2,000 years revealed controversies as well as efforts to suppress these writings considered heretical. Documents such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Philip presented different claims and "secret teachings" of Jesus.

Bishop Irenaeus, writing in the second century C.E., had called these documents and teachings as the work of "Satan-inspired heretics." His five-volume work titled "The Destruction and Overthrow of Falsely So-Called Gnosis" called them "full of blasphemy." Pagels wonders what we can learn from these documents, hidden so long, about early controversies in Christianity.

Pagels' graduate study led her to conclude that "Christianity is a huge, messy heap of traditions, stories, images and practices, collected by people all over the world — much that may be of value, and much that may not. ... Ever since the second century, Christian leaders calling themselves orthodox (straight thinking) have defined choice as heresy." She then notes that the Greek term translated as "heresy" means "choice" and admits that she needs choice. In her view, the tradition has been full of choice and different interpretations.

"In each generation, leaders from the apostle Paul to Martin Luther King Jr. ... have selected elements from that vast collection, discarding some and reinterpreting others, focusing on those that deal with the specific challenges each one faces. Far from destroying Christian traditions, this selection process enables them to survive, adapt and spread, even today, in radically different cultures as new situations unimaginable in previous generations arise."

Pagels now asks herself the question, "Am I religious?" And responds, "Yes, incorrigibly, by temperament, if you mean susceptible to the music, the rituals, the daring leaps of imagination and metaphor so often found in music, poems, liturgies, rituals and stories — not only those that are Christian, but also to the cantor's singing at a bar mitzvah, to Hopi and Zuni dances on the mesas of the American Southwest, to the call to prayer in Indonesia."

Given the variety of denominations and creedal statements, let alone practices, are we not all in the process of choosing? She finds helpful passages from the Gospel of Thomas opening us up to "more than a single path. Instead of telling us what to believe, they engage both head and heart ... while deepening spiritual practice by discovering our own inner resources."

Pagels will be in Grand Rapids for the annual Interfaith Consortium conference Oct. 30. In preparation for her visit, our interfaith reading book group will meet on alternate Tuesdays in four sessions leading up to her visit. To learn more about the conference or the reading group, go to our website, interfaithunderstanding.org, or contact us at interfaith@gvsu.edu