Beyond Belief:  
The Secret Gospel of Thomas.

Lost Christianities:  
The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew.


CHRISTIANITY, and indeed all religions, come and go in the public awareness as times change. Currently religion is once again on the public's mind and in the popular press. Mel Gibson's movie, The Passion of Christ, coincides with public displays of religious fervor by politicians. Indeed, antagonists debating such contentious issues as homosexuality, abortion, prayer in school, and the inclusion of the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance often use religious (and sometimes Biblical) arguments to bolster their positions. One may think that the diversity and even hostility in current Christian thought represents a new and dangerous phenomena. However, these books by Pagels and Ehrman clearly demonstrate that such disagreement and diversity have accompanied Christianity since its inception, and the historical appearance of consensus is only an illusion.

Pagels, a professor of religion at Princeton, is an influential religious historian. She writes eloquently contrasting the "secret" Gospel of Thomas with the Gospel of John. The Gospel of Thomas was discovered in 1945 in Upper Egypt in a cache of early Christian writings. The manuscript includes sayings and dialogues that were attributed to Jesus but never became part of the New Testament and were deemed heretical by some early Christians. The author of the Gospel of John, like Thomas, is unknown, but its tone and content differ significantly from the writings of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Pagels' analysis leads her to believe that John was written to discredit Thomas. The primary difference between the two gospels is that Thomas believed we all have the inner capacity to be like Jesus, while John maintained that Jesus was more than unique, not a man but God Himself. For John, only through belief in Jesus could we find divine truth. This view prevailed and became a fundamental article of faith in orthodox Christianity. But modern scholarship has shown that the writings of Thomas and other "secret" writings show wide variations in early Christian perspectives. The view of John's gospel - Jesus as God - became part of the Nicene Creed, and other interpretations by Thomas (and, to some extent, the other three gospels) were suppressed in ... well, an "unchristian" manner.

The only distraction from this easy-to-read book is that the Gospel of Thomas is not presented directly, and the reader does not get the opportunity to interpret its message for him - or herself.
Ehrman chairs the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina. His Lost Christianities covers the same time period as Pagels. However, his book is broader in scope and less personal in style. The information he presents is comprehensive and probably new to most readers. Ehrman chronicles 45 major (and minor) apocryphal texts - some probably authentic and some definitely fanciful, even entertaining. He shows the wide variety of views represented in proto-Christian literature, much of which was drawn from pagan, Jewish, and Greek influences. Many of these texts are clearly forgeries in the sense that they were not actually written by their supposed authors. One of the more interesting is called the Gospel of Mary in which Jesus reveals his teachings in a vision to Mary Magdalene. The Infant Gospel of Thomas gives an interesting account of the miraculous deeds of Jesus between the ages of five and 12. The Acts of Pilate in which Pilate is exonerated at the trial of Jesus demonstrates Jesus's superiority over pagan gods. The Epistle of Barnabas argues that Judaism is a false religion, the Old Testament is really a Christian book, and the correspondence of Paul and Seneca was forged to elevate Paul's philosophical standing. Ehrman writes well and is a good storyteller about a complex socio-political time, the first to third centuries, A.D. The religious conflicts were extensive and include: 1) those who thought Jewishness was fundamental versus those who thought that Jewish practices were detrimental to right standing before God; 2) Those who thought that there was one god and those who thought there were two, one from the Old Testament and one from the New; 3) those who thought Jesus was completely human and not divine, and those who insisted Jesus was completely divine and not human.

Orthodoxy or what we now consider current Christianity won, Ehrman claims, by following the ancient route through Judaism but rejecting the practices of contemporary Judaism, by stressing a church hierarchy, and by maintaining constant communication with each other. The result was the New Testament as we know it and rejection of the apocryphal books.

While Pagels feels something was lost by not having access to the Gospel of Thomas, Ehrman takes a different view. He sees orthodox Christianity as the defining philosophy of Western civilization that has made us what we are. Clearly establishing a unified religion with its hubris came at the expense of tolerance and respect for diversity - a high price indeed.