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There is an index of ancient sources and of authors but, unfortunately, no subject index.

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Adam, Eve, and the Serpent

Elaine Pagels

New York: Random House, 1988

xxviii + 189 pp.

Elaine Pagels, known to students of early Christianity as the author of technical monographs and articles and to a wider audience as the author of *The Gnostic Gospels* (Random House, 1979), which won the (American) National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, in *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* draws on much current scholarship, including her own, to write, once again, for that elusive person publishers perennially postulate is out there somewhere—the “general educated reader”. She succeeds magnificently. Such readers will be both entertained and instructed. Students of the period, who will know many of the sources she explicates and the secondary literature she cites, will admire the skill with which she weaves together many seemingly disparate strands into a compelling retelling of the story of Christians of the first four centuries. The opening chapters of Genesis are the loom on which she weaves their interpretations of those intriguing narratives.

Chapter one looks at Jesus and the Jesus movement, against the background of Judaism. Both Jesus and his Jewish compatriots appeal to Genesis in support of their attitudes to divorce, procreation, and family, but those of Jesus (so the New Testament gospels report) diverge so from common Jewish ones that a new religious movement comes into being. By the end of the second century, however, the attitudes and practices within the movement span a spectrum from endorsement of marriage and reproduction to ascetic renunciation.

The Christian martyrs die opposing the Roman order, but Pagels brings them to life (ch. 2)—i.e., at her hands they emerge as flesh-and-blood human beings whose behaviour both before and at the final test, however irrational it appeared to the Roman authorities and to pagans generally, “made sense” to Christians: theirs was the true liberty that opposed an oppressive social and political order. Interpretation of Genesis is more implicit than explicit in this chapter, but in chapter three, on Christian gnostics, it is central.

The gnostics disagreed with mainstream Christians on how to read the early chapters of Genesis. The latter took them as literal history and drew

moral instruction from them. Gnostics read them as spiritual allegory with myriad meanings, including the message that humans are of divine origin but, falling into the human condition of suffering and limited free will, need *gnosis*—special knowledge—to deliver them. Christians like Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen

stood unanimously against the gnostics in proclaiming the Christian gospel as a message of freedom—moral freedom, freedom of the will, expressed in Adam's original freedom to choose a life free of pain and suffering....So long as Christianity remained a persecuted movement, the majority of Christian preachers proclaimed the plain and powerful message of freedom that appealed to so many people within the Roman world—perhaps especially to those who had never experienced freedom in their everyday lives (76).

When persecution ended, ascetic renunciation replaced martyrdom as the consummate way of discipleship (ch. 4). Virginity was paradise regained, and the new way to freedom. For men, it was "freedom from the oppressive weight of imperial rule, of custom, tradition 'destiny,' or fate, and from the internal tyranny of the passions"; for women, "the opportunity to travel, to devote themselves to intellectual and spiritual pursuits, to found institutions, and to direct them" (96); for both, the freedom from the burdens and anxieties of marriage and parenthood. In the new climate of political favour that Christians now enjoyed, however, a new climate of Christian opinion also developed, repudiating the notions of freedom that the first three centuries had stressed. Pagels devotes chapters five and six to the man most singly responsible for the change, Augustine of Hippo.

Why would Christians choose a doctrine of human bondage over one of human freedom? she asks. One answer is that it gave a more adequate interpretation of the new social and political situation of Christians, who were now the emperor's brothers and sisters in Christ. Pondering the Genesis account of the fall, Augustine read there his own story of bondage to passion. He acted "against my own will,... I was not, therefore, the cause of it, but the 'sin that dwells in me': from the punishment of that *more voluntary sin, because I was a son of Adam*" (*Confessions* 8.10; cited, p. 107). Adam once ruled over his body, but his disobedience to God brought disobedience of the body to the will (110). The empirical proof: (male) sexual arousal occurs willy nilly: "At times, the urge intrudes uninvited; at other times, it deserts the panting lover, and, although desire blazes in the mind, the body is frigid" (*City of God* 14.16; cited, p. 111). Such is the condition of humans (Christ excepted), for the semen that propagates them is Adam's semen (109). Human government is thus necessary to control humanity; the bishop, too, rules "in God's place" (113ff.), and obedience becomes a prime Christian virtue (110, 124).

In Augustine's debate with Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum, the latter two represent the pre-Augustinian view of suffering and death as not physically transmitted from Adam (that would unjustly punish his progeny for his sin) but rather as simply "the nature of nature" (ch. 6). One can

rage against nature—and be miserable—or accept it, and grow spiritually. Indeed, argues Julian, God's pronouncement on the first couple—"you are earth, and to earth you shall return"—shows divine mercy, for death puts a limit to suffering. Pagels' answer to the question why the majority of Christians chose Augustine's interpretation of the fall goes beyond theories of social control (humans are evil and need to be governed) to the human desire to understand and explain suffering and death as not simply random or quid-pro-quo punishment for wrong doing but as impersonal pattern: the fault lies in the primal parents.

At the annual meetings of the Canadian learned societies in religion at Université Laval in May 1989 a two-hour session was devoted to Pagels' book, with Pagels present to respond to the respondents to her book. Among the corrections and amplifications they suggested, one might interest readers of this journal who stand in the Augustinian tradition (e.g., Lutherans): in the chaos of the late Roman Empire, Christians in their helplessness might well have found the doctrine of divine grace more compelling than the guilt that Pagels suggests.

A fascinating book. In the words Augustine says led to his conversion, "Tolle, lege" ("Take, read!"). Then one can look forward to reading Jeremy Cohen's forthcoming work on Genesis 1:28, "*Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It*": *The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Cornell University Press, December 1989).

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Christian Socialism: An Informal History

John C. Cort
Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988
xiii + 401 pp.

No one would contest seriously that John Cort has the credentials to undertake "the battle" for Christian socialism against the ideas and practices that emerged from Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. He is a militant of many years, serving as a garment-worker organizer, as a member of the Catholic Worker movement and as a socialist journalist. Further, there has long been a need for an easy-to-read book about Christian socialism that provides an overview rather than specialization.

On the positive side, the book guides the reader with care and clarity, and there is a dignified sense of dialogue throughout. Unlike so many other authors Cort does not attempt to manipulate his audience. He is very direct about his own biases. "So this is an opinionated history," he tells us, "but all writing of history is by definition opinionated." Also, Cort