The Heretical Revival: The Nag Hammadi Library in American Religion and Culture

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Abstract
In December 1945, in the shadow of the towering cliffs of the Jabl al-Tariff, Egyptian peasant Muhammad Ali struck upon an antique jar while digging for fertilizer. The subsequent tale of treasures exhumed, blood feuds, black market intrigue and scholars smuggling texts across national borders has become a modern legend, while the twelve codices found and collectively referred to as the Nag Hammadi Library have revolutionized our understanding of early Christian history. Yet while numerous scholarly texts have theorized how the Nag Hammadi find has altered our understanding of the ancient Mediterranean, there has been comparatively little analysis of how these same texts have impacted, transformed, or inspired contemporary religion.

My dissertation, "The Heretical Revival: The Nag Hammadi Library in American Religion and Culture," is the first book-length study of the reception of the Nag Hammadi Codices (NHC) as religious documents. In it I analyze interpretations of the NHC within orthodox congregations, Gnostic churches, media, the arts, and “spiritual but not religious” individuals. Utilizing cultural memory theory and the social-scientific theory of symbolic loss, I argue that the publication of the NHC has inspired two related lines of interpretation in America. First, the NHC have been met as a “return of the repressed” Christian memory that has generated debates about the true Christian history. Groups, individuals and media use the NHC to assert competing interpretations of the Christian past that contend for authority over Christianity in the present. Secondly, many individuals in this reception history read the NHC after having been alienated from mainstream Christianity. In an effort to reconnect to the Christian tradition, these individuals use the NHC to reinterpret Christian symbols along psychological, feminist, and metaphysical lines. I offer two conclusions. One, that the reception of the NHC exposes a reconfiguration of Christian memory in America that began within new religions and culture (media, art, and academia), but is now entering traditional, mainline churches. Two, that this reconfiguration of memory is itself an attempt to adapt Christianity to fit an America influenced by the counterculture, secularization, and religious pluralization.

Keyword
Nag Hammadi Library; Gnosticism; American Religions; psychology; symbolic loss; More...

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The site includes the Gnostic Society Library with the complete Nag Hammadi Library, and a large collection of other primary Gnostic scriptures and documents. In his study, The American Religion, noted literary critic Harold Bloom suggests a second characteristic of Gnosticism that might help us conceptually circumscribe its mysterious heart. Gnosticism, says Bloom, “is a knowing, by and of an uncreated self, or self-within-the self, and [this] knowledge leads to freedom....”9 Primary among all the revelatory perceptions a Gnostic might reach was the profound awakening that came with knowledge that something within him was uncreated. The Nag Hammadi Library in English edited by James M. Robinson. The epochal translation of the entire Nag Hammadi Library. The emergence of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945 greatly increased the amount of source material available. Its translation into English and other modern languages in 1977 resulted in a wide dissemination, and as a result had observable influence on several modern figures, and upon modern Western culture in general. This article attempts to summarize those modern figures and movements that have been influenced by Gnosticism, both prior and subsequent to the Nag Hammadi discovery. 1.2 Madame Blavatsky. 1.3 G. R. S. Mead. 1.4 The Gnostic Church revival in France. 2 Early to mid-20th century. 2.1 Carl Jung. My dissertation, “The Heretical Revival: The Nag Hammadi Library in American Religion and Culture,” is the first book-length study of the reception of the Nag Hammadi Codices (NHC) as religious documents. In it I analyze interpretations of the NHC within orthodox congregations, Gnostic churches, media, the arts, and “spiritual but not religious” individuals. Utilizing cultural memory theory and the social-scientific theory of symbolic loss, I argue that the publication of the NHC has inspired two related lines of interpretation in America. First, the NHC have been met as a “return of the repre