

Nag Hammadi in the Bible Belt: Teaching to the Converted, Reflections on Gnostic Texts as Teaching Tools

Natalie C. Polzer, *University of Louisville*

Although Professor Frederik Wisse was never my thesis supervisor, his graduate teaching has remained influential in my teaching and scholarship, and I am most pleased to offer this essay as tribute to my much respected and well appreciated former teacher and colleague. Regrettably I do not read Coptic, nor does it appear that I ever shall, being fully occupied with the prosaic but all consuming advising, program planning, undergraduate and graduate teaching, committee work, public appearances, that constitute my current job as Professor of Jewish Studies and Comparative Religion in a large, urban, public university located on the fringes of the American South, yet very much in the heart of the Bible Belt. But strangely enough, Coptic has colored my teaching here in a way it never did while teaching in Canada, not the Coptic language itself precisely, but the largely Coptic corpus of the Nag Hammadi library (Robinson 1978). While studying these texts for the first time in Professor Wisse's graduate seminar on Gnosticism in fall 1983, I could not foresee how useful they would be, 20 years later, trying to instill a critical approach to the study of religious belief and practice here in Bible Belt, almost Southern, USA. In fact, if the success of one's academic training can be judged by how much a graduate student can directly transfer content from a course to his subsequent teaching, Fred Wisse's Gnosticism course comes out, without contest, on top, providing me with more raw teaching material than any other course taken during my graduate career.

Although I teach in a public American university, hence ostensibly effecting the constitutional mandate of separation of Church and State, the student culture fully embodies the dominant culture of the region. This culture is a recently urbanized culture, a pious culture, and a thoroughly Christian culture. It is also a patriotic culture, right wing politically, in which being a good Christian and a good American

are synonymous. Approximately one fifth of the students in every class are or have been in the US military, and often wear their army uniforms to class. Evidence of an intensely lived Christian culture is everywhere. When driving along country byways, triads of wooden crosses planted in the fields and front yards fly past, a repeating mute refrain of Christ's salvation. My current city of residence not only boasts the reactionary Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, which has just split from the mainstream world Baptist coalition, but also the locally renowned Southeast Christian Church, a mammoth amphitheatre seating over 5,000 churchgoers on Easter morning where the sermon is projected, live and in color, on three huge movie screens rising up behind the main altar. A normative introductory pick up line in city bars is "What church do you go to?" On campus, the Southern Baptist Student Union is housed in the largest independently owned structure, a freestanding, handsome brick building, while the Interfaith Center (Jewish, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian) situated next to it is so indistinguishable from the hill into which it is built that it is nicknamed "The Bomb Shelter." Students go on organized revival trips to Florida during the Spring Break to convert their erring peers in the flesh pots of Daytona Beach. Evangelical bookstores proliferate and thrive. More than a quarter of the students in my religion classes will articulate that the story of the creation of the world in Genesis 1 and 2 describes the creation of the universe in factual and actual detail. Students express their commitment to Christ with trendy tattoos, often in places on the body, which although they might be aesthetically pleasing, strike me, Jew that I am, as theologically problematic. Emily, a pious Christian student in my senior Theory of Religion course, showed me her recent tattoo. A Maltese cross topped by a scroll inscribed "INRI," it springs up from the nethermost point of her spinal column, just above the hip line of her bell bottoms. Lionel, an African American football player, sports an impressive and complicated crown of thorns circling his muscular right upper forearm inscribed "Himself died for your sins."

While the university culture spouts the usual American lip service to tolerance, diversity and open-minded critical learning, these values seem to be much harder to practice than to articulate. For instance, the student culture of this university necessitates that whether a student can be a believing Christian and study evolutionary biology at the same time be explicitly addressed in the opening lecture of

Introduction to Biological Anthropology, classified as a science course. Although a good 40% of the local urban population is Roman Catholic, judging from my Comparative Religion classes, Roman Catholics are not considered to be Christians by mainstream Protestants. When the class is solicited for an example of a religious phenomenon from a “non-Christian” religion, more than 50% of the time an example from Roman Catholicism will be offered. No matter how many times I explain that Roman Catholics believe in the salvific power of Jesus’s sacrificial death and resurrection, and therefore are Christians, I get student responses like the following exam identification item: “Mother Goddess—a primal goddess of nature and fertility in ancient, polytheistic pagan religions whose male counterpart is the Sky God. Example: The Virgin Mary.”

Teaching the critical study of religion and scripture in such a cultural environment is extremely difficult not only because most students are seriously religious themselves, but because of the greater political ramifications of belonging to the religious right in the United States today. Despite the Constitutional mandate of separation of Church and State, the religious and the political are perceived as forces embodied in two diametrically opposed camps of right and left. To hold left wing politics means one must be a secularist; to hold right wing political beliefs goes hand in hand with piety. Over the past 30 years, inhabiting a committed religious culture has come to mean inhabiting a right wing political culture, a culture perceived and experienced in diametric opposition to left wing political culture, which is viewed as synonymous with critical humanism. Thus, teaching Religious Studies as a critical humanistic discipline, even in a state university, is problematic and fraught with dangers. Not only does one run the risk of offending pious individuals by forcing them to examine their own religious beliefs and practices critically, one has to work hard to maintain a class room dynamic that does not degenerate into the “Us against Them,” the right against the left, the believers against the faithless, the Lamb against the Beast. In this teaching environment, Fred Wisse’s graduate seminar on Gnosticism has unexpectedly provided me with invaluable teaching material. Incorporating Gnostic texts into my curriculum as basic teaching texts allows me to “fight fire with fire,” that is, to teach critical modes of examining religion without alienating pious students with what they would consider a secularist, i.e., academic approach.

In January 1991, shortly after returning to Montreal after completing my Ph.D. in Rabbinics at Cambridge University in England, I bumped into Professor Wisse in what was then the Religious Studies Library in the Birks Building. Although my McGill M.A. had been in Jewish Studies, I had taken several memorable graduate courses in the Faculty of Religious Studies, notably including, as I have said, Wisse's graduate seminar in Gnosticism, in Fall 1983. I therefore made a point of asking whether the Gnosticism seminar was still up and running and was dejected to learn that it was no longer offered, as it had not been considered useful enough for the needs of the graduate students then enrolled in the Faculty of Religious Studies.

The influence of the course was not simply due to the fascinating subject matter, although certainly, the Gnostic texts rank high as objects of interest, being full of the kind of illogical, arcane, obscure, bizarre yet totally sincere and pious religious sensibility that I find fascinating. Nor did the course impress simply because Wisse himself was freshly and vigorously involved in research in the area, having himself translated and commented on several of the texts in the then recently published *Nag Hammadi Library*.^{*} It was exciting to study with a scholar whose expertise was not only extensive, but so immediate; given the recent availability of the texts in English, not much more than 30 years since their discovery, we had the sensation of participating vicariously, through Professor Wisse, in the cutting edge of scholarship. Yet, while the content and the immediacy of the material made the course memorable, its most important contributions to my intellectual development were in the areas of critical thought and methodology. In sore need of methodological training, I fell under Wisse's wing at a time that proved instrumental to my subsequent academic success. Looking over my course notes (which I have meticulously saved, along with copies of all of the readings), I am struck, despite the 20 years of research and teaching experience behind me, by Fred Wisse's consistent attention to textual and historical methodologies which he insisted that we understand, identify and apply in our own papers. Over and over in my notes, each survey lecture is introduced with a list of the historical presuppositions held by various scholars; through logical extension, the resulting necessary conclusions of each presupposition are drawn out with careful attention to the textual evidence. The historical and logical ramifications of the conclusions are spelled out. Moreover, while Wisse's own idea of

the correct historical presupposition was made evident most vigorously, a complete, detailed survey of current and past scholarly opinions were presented.

Not only did Professor Wisse exemplify a model for rigorous historical and textual methodologies, he presented a coherent critical framework for understanding the archaizing tendencies of revivalist religious movements, which proves as useful for understanding recent New Age religious revival and Christian evangelical movements as for the emergence of ancient Gnosticism. At certain periods within certain cultural and/or geographic parameters, historical and cultural circumstances are such that the internal development of religious movements becomes stagnant. One result of this stagnation is proliferation of religious diversity, either internally within a specific religious movement, or by the creation of new religions. In both cases, diversification does not create radically new beliefs and practices, but utilizes fragments of current or pre-existing religious symbols, concepts and artifacts. The fragments effecting religious revival must be invigorating, exciting, revitalizing, hence not associated with the spiritually stagnant, mainstream religious traditions. Judging from Wisse's analysis of Gnostic movements as well as the contemporary New Age phenomena, what are considered to be the most revitalizing of religious elements are ones identified as ancient and somehow primal. The imagined rediscovery and "reintegration" of lost, ancient texts and practices often gives a perceived sense of connection and immediacy with the divine that the contemporary, normative religious tradition is perceived as lacking.

Yet, this sense of connection with the ancient and archaic is imagined and pre-selected. As Wisse lectured in 1983, when Gnostic and Neoplatonic movements incorporated ancient pagan elements into their syncretistic mythologies and philosophies they included the fragments that were relevant to the exigencies of their world views. A selective process directs the incorporation of "the ancient" in all archaizing revival movements, be they philosophical or religious. For the members of the revival movements have their own preconceived notion of the truths that the energizing, long hidden, secrets of the past will yield. Ancient illumination always meets the needs of contemporary faith.

Like the cosmopolitan and diverse Hellenistic culture of the first through third centuries C.E., a process of stagnation, internal and

external diversification and “archaization” characterizes many traditional religious movements in North America of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Reactionary religious movements are never immune from general cultural influence. One aspect of New Age diversification and “archaization” that has influenced the popular religious world view of the religious right is the assumption that a wealth of hidden truth and venerable illumination resides in the magical and energizing remote past, the time of the beginnings, *in illo tempore* as Eliade would have it. For Christians, *tempus illud*, is not the time of the creation of the world, but the time when Christ walked the earth as a living man. Any text, artifact, idea perceived to come from that time is especially spiritually meaningful and revitalizing. What is particularly fascinating, and also advantageous to me as a teacher, is how film representations associated with the time Christ walked the earth are created and exploited as a mechanism for archaizing spiritual revival. And films are effective agents of religious revival not simply because of their religious content; film itself, the medium both as concrete artifact and as a visual experience, holds a central place of mythological, and hence religious, authority in the American imagination.

The central authority of film as a medium in North America is such that anything concerning religion embodied in a commercial film holds a place of immediate and automatic authority in the minds of my students. Fortunately for me, the undisputed authority of the *Gospel of Thomas* (Robinson 1978, 117-130) can be firmly fixed in the popular mind of American youth by virtue of its having been the subject of a popular commercial film, *Stigmata*, that came out in the late 1990's. *Stigmata*'s plot exemplifies New Age revivalism, using a Gnostic myth as its base. The rediscovered true teachings of Jesus (*The Gospel of Thomas* in Aramaic and in paleo-Hebrew script, rather than in Coptic) are repressed by the “Blind Archons” of ignorance (the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, specifically, the Jesuits). The pantheistic illumination preached by Jesus before adulteration by the later Gospels is reawakened by a Sophia/Christ team (a punked-out, sexually liberated blond hairdresser and a handsome Roman Catholic priest). With full ironic awareness, I often thank the Lord for giving me the film *Stigmata* for undergraduate teaching. Due to the presence of *The Gospel of Thomas* in this inaccurate and sexualized religious romance, my students, largely pious Protestants of the evangelical mold, accept the text, and by extension, other Gnostic texts of the

Nag Hammadi corpus, as the true and authoritative ancient Christian teachings.

Thus predisposed by contemporary revivalist religious culture to find anything ancient, relevant, and predisposed to find anything presented through the medium of film, authoritative, students are willing to respond to the critical problems occasioned by the existence of the Nag Hammadi texts and their Gnostic world view and theologies, in a way that they do not respond to straightforward, critical analysis of religious phenomena. Exploiting the Gnostic texts as teaching tools forces the students to confront the realities of religious diversity, and thus, to critically confront their own tenets of Christian faith and to place them in a comparative conceptual framework. The tenets of Christian faith I explore with the help of the Gnostic texts are the humanity of Christ and his resurrection in the body, and the meaning and function of the creation story in Genesis.

Unlike the general student population at McGill University, where very few students could actually tell you what was meant by “justification by faith” or Christ being “the lamb of God who removes the sins from the world,” here a Scriptural sense of Christ’s incarnation, sacrifice and resurrection in the body can be coherently articulated by the majority of students. Moreover, the meaning of Christ is a story, a gospel, a narrative focusing on a specific moment in historical time, the crucifixion. For the naïve student reader in my *Introduction to the Study of Religion*, *The Gospel of Thomas* is a shocking and difficult text. Here is a Jesus familiar by virtue of the sayings which also appear in the canonical gospels, a Jesus who is on the side of the weak and the oppressed, evidenced by his defense of Mary Magdalene from the criticism of Simon Peter (Robinson 1978, 130). Yet, although a familiar Jesus, he is a Jesus without a story; here is no incarnation, no annunciation, no birth, no prophecies predicted and fulfilled, and most significantly, no suffering, no sacrifice and no resurrection. Pious students must confront an ancient form of Christianity which, although fully accepting Christ as an authoritative divine teacher, neglects the narrative of his life, sacrificial death and resurrection in the body.

It is wrong to say that the Gnostic myth of Christ’s role in salvation is not a story; being a myth, in the critical sense of the term, it must be a story illustrating basic religious and ontological principles. According to Fred Wisse’s synthetic summary of “the Gnostic myth” preserved in my notes, true Gnosis, the primal illumination of the

eternal aeons has been entrapped in the prison of matter, darkness and error. Christ, along with Sophia a “female” power, is an emissary from the eternal aeons, whose salvific role is to liberate the spark of primal illumination within humankind from the dark prison of matter, under the rule of the ignorant Archons or lesser gods. The spark can be liberated through recognition of the true Gnosis that Christ brings and by the rejection of the material world of the flesh, including the false consciousness of truth embodied in traditional religious belief and practice.

The *Gospel of Thomas*’s notion of salvation through Christ is, thus, effected through the intellect: “Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death.” (Robinson 1978, 118) And, although many of Christ’s sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* are parallel or similar to those in the synoptic Gospels, many are enigmatic to the point of appearing nonsensical. What, for instance, can the average pious Southern Baptist student make of:

When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female, female; and when you fashion eyes in place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness, then you will enter the Kingdom (Robinson 1978, 121).

The interpretation of this saying is deliberately obscure, unfathomable to the contemporary Christian student, thus excluding the pious reader from the mode of Christian salvation espoused by the text. In other words, the pious born again are confronted with a form of very serious Christianity which excludes them from salvation, as they are not able to interpret the cryptic sayings. An easy way out of the theological difficulty presented by the notion of salvation through the mind, not faith, would be to reject the *Gospel of Thomas* as “Satanic verses,” as lies, a false gospel. Surprisingly, however, in my teaching experience no student has ever challenged the authenticity of the *Gospel of Thomas*! And this, despite the fact that I make it clear that it is non-canonical and heterodox. The cognitive dissonance resulting from the students’ perceived “exclusion” from salvation can be exploited to push them towards an analytical stance towards theology and a critical recognition of religion as a historical and political process.

While resurrection in the flesh is simply not an issue in the *Gospel of Thomas*, other Gnostic texts grapple with the problem resurrection in the flesh poses to a mythological framework in which matter and the flesh are inherently evil and degraded. While my knowledge of Gnostic theology is not sufficient to understand precisely what is meant by the relevant sections of the *Gospel of Philip*, it is clear that, using the metaphor of the garment, its author is struggling to explain resurrection in the flesh in a way compatible with the Gnostic perception of the material body:

No one will hide a valuable object in something large, but many a time one has tossed countless thousands into a thing worth a penny. Compare the soul. It is a precious thing (and) it came to be in a contemptible body. Some are afraid lest they rise naked. Because of this they wish to rise in the flesh and [they] do not know that it is those who wear the [flesh] who are naked... In this world those who put on garments are better than the garments. In the kingdom of heaven the garments are better than those who have put them on. (Robinson 1978, 134-5)

Moreover, in order to synthesize Christ's resurrection with Gnostic theology of the body, the *Gospel of Philip*, explicitly and probably with polemical intent, reverses the order of the normative resurrection narrative: "Those who say that the Lord died first and (then) rose up are in error, for he rose up first and (then) died. If one does not first attain the resurrection will he not die? As God lives, he would be (already) <dead>." (Robinson 1978, 134) Turning to another example of grappling with the theological problems imposed by a Gnostic Christ incarnated in the body, a famous passage in *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* goes to the extreme of claiming that the Passion and crucifixion of Christ were illusions, intending to fool the ignorant archons limited by their false consciousness. It was not Christ himself, but human substitutes who suffered the torments of the body, while Christ laughed at the ignorance of his persecutors in the heights, far above the blind archons and "... the offspring of their error":

For my death, which they think happened, (happened) to them in their error and blindness, since they nailed their man unto their death . . . It was another, their father, who drank the gall and the vinegar; it was not I. They struck me with the reed; it was another,

Simon, who bore the cross on his shoulder. It was another upon whom they placed the crown of thorns (Robinson 1978, 332).

Used as undergraduate teaching texts, these Gnostic writings—with their radically different theologies of incarnation, resurrection and salvation—force students to confront the reality of Christian theological diversity to an extent that is impossible when discussing contemporary religious difference head on. While unable to engage intellectually with the religious pluralism and diversity of the present, religious diversity of 2000 years ago is compelling, even when it denies or transforms basic contemporary Christian dogma.

Gnostic interpretations and transformations of the scriptural creation story are especially didactically useful for getting pious students to think critically about the contemporary political role of Creationism. Popular American culture, whether religious or secular, in willed ignorance of the millions of culturally specific creation stories throughout the world, basically accepts two diametrically opposed scenarios for the way in which the world and all upon it came into being: the Biblical Creation Story or the “Big Bang” and “Evolution.” In the popular mind, both the scientific and the religious view of creation are understood as literal fact, rather than myth or hypothesis. The world did come into being, we know this because the world is here and nothing comes from nothing. It came into being in either one of two ways, created through God’s will, as described in Genesis, or through the casual accident of molecular collision and genetic mutation. The world cannot have come into being in two ways at once, so one of the two must be factually wrong. If one is wrong, the other is right.

The binary opposition between the two belief systems, “Creationism” versus “Evolutionism” has had profound social and political ramifications in American culture. It helps maintain the radical social estrangement of the political right from the left, and also perpetuates a binary cognitive mode of perception which does not allow for categorical ambiguity, and hence, for both critical perception of intellectual, cultural and religious diversity. Studying the Gnostic interpretation of the creation story in Genesis is extremely useful in a classroom where the large majority of students are limited by these binary cognitive thought structures. Pious and secular students alike are shocked by the Gnostic take on the Genesis creation story. The

Gnostic interpretation of the Genesis creation story takes the story seriously as a factual account of creation, but transforms it to accord with the Gnostic myth. Whatever he may be called in the various Gnostic accounts of creation, Yaldabaoth, the Cosmocrator, Samael, here the creator God of Genesis is the ignorant villain, not the all powerful hero. The creator God is a God of lies and illusion, he must be, for did he not say the world and all he created was “Good”? Yet matter is evil, so the creator God himself must be evil, deluded or both. In fact, the creator God in *The Hypostasis of the Archons* is Samael, the blind God, who sins against Truth through misconception:

Their chief is blind; [because of his] Power and his ignorance [and his] arrogance he said, with his [Power], “It is I who am God; there is none [apart from me]. When he said this, he sinned against [the Entirety]. And this speech got up to Incorruptibility; then there was a voice that came forth from Incorruptibility which said, ‘You are mistaken Samael’ – which is the God of the blind.’ (Robinson 1978, 153)

Especially shocking is the place of the human being in the Gnostic dualistic hierarchy of illumination and darkness, and the Gnostic transformation of the biblical “fall” from an act of moral disobedience to cognitive misconception. In the pseudepigraphic *Apocalypse of Adam*, Adam and Eve are “. . . higher than the God who had created [them],” possessing the glory and the knowledge of the aeons and the eternal God (Robinson 1978, 256–7). The human “fall” is not a moral diminishment, but a descent into the darkness of ignorance from the full knowledge of their ultimate origins in the glory of the aeons. Adam and Eve become mortal, not through the immorality of disobedience, but through believing a lie told them by the Creator God, namely, that he created not only their body but their living soul: “And the Lord, the God who had created us, stood before us. He said to us, ‘Adam why were you sighing in your heart? Do you not know that I am the God who created you? And I breathed into you a spirit of life as a living soul.’ Then darkness came upon our eyes” (Robinson 1978, 257). The familiarity of the story enhances its strangeness. Here is a creation story in which Adam and Eve are inherently superior to the God who created them, a story in which moral temptation, disobedience, hence free will, are irrelevant, since humankind’s fall resulting from intellectual misconception is a natural,

an automatic, result of their embodiment in created flesh: "Then the vigor of our eternal knowledge was destroyed in us, and weakness pursued us. Therefore the days of our life became few. For I knew that I had come under the authority of death" (Robinson 1978, 257).

Teaching creation stories critically as myths of cultural foundation in the American context is always difficult, because the students are so very predisposed to accepting only two possible versions of the creation story, "Creationism" or "Evolutionism." Yet, the Gnostic inversion of Genesis captures their attention in a way the creation stories of other cultures do not do. They become indignant, puzzled, irate, but they take the Gnostic versions seriously, enabling me to exploit them as didactic leverage for critical discussion of the general place and meaning of creation stories in religious systems without offending them by appearing to challenge their belief system.

I have often contemplated why the Gnostic texts are taken so seriously by my current student population, enabling them to be so effectively used as critical teaching texts. One possible explanation is that the Gnostic world view and mind set, with its radicalized literalism and dualistic tendencies, is similar to the world view and mind set of the American religious right. Certainly, the vehement, almost belligerent, exclusivist piety of many of the Gnostic texts, in tone if not in content, is quite similar to the tone of religious discourse in the Bible Belt. The students may respond so strongly to the texts, because of the tone of exclusive certainty. However different Gnostic theology may be from that of the contemporary Christian right, it is clear that the Gnostic world view takes Jesus and the Creation totally seriously. Moreover, placed in a political context, the Gnostic documents, along with the evidence of the Church Fathers, show the radical estrangement of the many competing theological systems and ecclesiastical institutions during the formative years of Christianity. The Gnostic texts, while only sometimes explicitly polemical, communicate a sense of ideological isolation, of radical estrangement from and opposition to the mainstream. Similarly, the discourse of the contemporary religious right in the United States breathes a strong sense of ideological isolation and radical estrangement from American secularist, mainstream culture. In other words, although the theological content of the Gnostic texts is unfamiliar, even shocking, the dualistic, oppositional and fervid Gnostic world view is comfortably familiar.

If the above is true, then I am, in a sense, fighting ‘fire with fire’, by using the Gnostic texts to spark a perspective of critical analysis towards students’ own contemporary belief and practice. Ultimately, my choice to use these texts stems from pragmatism: they work. Perhaps for reasons which have nothing whatsoever to do with academic critical inquiry, they ignite the mind of many of my students while other material leaves them bored or cold. Yet, while I will continue to use the *Nag Hammadi* texts as introductory, undergraduate teaching texts as long as they keep their hold on the student imagination, I always feel somewhat uneasy in doing so, a sense of betrayal of the inner light of the religious mind. A nagging vision assails me while teaching about the immeasurable light of the illumination of the aeon of truth to the baseball hatted, tattooed, mostly evangelically pious, student throng. In my mind’s eye, I see St. Pachomius and a band of his gnarly desert followers transported to a service in the echoing rotunda of the Southeast Christian Church, gaping in amazement at the three giant, illuminated screens, upon which a trinity of identical gargantuan humans, in vivid color, preach the Holy Word. The authors and transmitters of the Gnostic texts belonged to a time when illumination was confined to the imagination, and could only be a private image in the fastness of the mind. We are able to project illumination, to externalize the vision of the inner mind’s eye, so that other eyes can see exactly what we do. The technological facility with which we are able to do this overwhelms the spark of the visual imagination, making it harder and harder to create and to maintain the private image of the inner mind.

We live in an age of the attenuation of religious vision, of inner sight, which, in the past has been one of the most powerful modes of religious creative expression and intellectual revival. For this reason, relying upon the authority of the medium of film to capture the student imagination always makes me feel unfaithful to the cause. *Oppure, si muove*. Yet, I remain thankful that I do have a context, no matter how peculiar and limited, in which to teach texts which continue to fascinate and challenge me as a textual scholar and as a religious thinker. I am happy, that unlike Frederik Wisse’s remarkable graduate seminar, I am able to make the apparently mutually exclusive worlds of Gnostic illumination and Yankee pragmatism compatible.

Notes

* Texts edited or jointly edited by Frederik Wisse in the *Nag Hammadi Library* (Robinson 1978): *The Apocryphon of John* (98–116); *The Gospel of the Egyptians* (195–205); *The Concept of Our Great Power* (284–89); *The Paraphrase of Shem* (308–28); *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* (329–38); *Apocalypse of Peter* (339–45); *The Teachings of Silvanus* (346–59); *The Three Steles of Seth* (362–67); *The Letter of Peter to Philip* (394–98); *The Sentences of Sextus* (454–59); *Fragments* (460).

Works Cited

Robinson, James M, ed. 1978. *The Nag Hammadi Library*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.