



# BILL MOYERS' WORLD OF IDEAS

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**Elaine Pagels - Part I**

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## Elaine Pagels - Part I

**BILL MOYERS:** *(on camera)* Good evening, I'm Bill Moyers. As you go to the polls tomorrow to choose the man you want to lead this country, spare a moment or two to think about Original Sin. Original Sin. There's an intimate connection between human depravity and government power. Or at least that's what the early Christian thinkers believed.

Tonight I'll talk with a historian of religion about how church and state have interpreted and depended upon that old story of the man, the woman, and the snake in the garden. Join me for part one of a conversation with Elaine Pagels.

*(voice-over)* As a scholar of religion, Elaine Pagels has often found herself in the company of heretics. She won the National Book Award in 1979 for a study of *The Gnostic Gospels*, the long-lost writings of unorthodox early Christians who claimed special knowledge of secret teachings by Jesus. Now she has published a new book that is receiving just as much attention, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent*. It's a study of how St. Augustine in the fourth century turned the story of Adam and Eve into the view of sexuality, politics, and human nature that became the official doctrine of church and state and shaped Western culture to this day.

The old children's rhyme says, "In Adam's fall, we sinned all." But that pessimistic view, says Pagels, was only one vision among many in the early church, and its rivals, condemned as heresy, deserve a closer look. Elaine Pagels teaches at Princeton University and lives in New York City, where we talked.

*(interwiewing)* Why did you get fascinated with the story of Adam and Eve?  
**ELAINE PAGELS:** Well, I've always been fascinated—it's a very provocative story, you know. It's a story about a man, a woman, a tree, a snake, a prohibition. And they break a prohibition and then they find out that they're naked. There's a lot of unanswered, provocative questions that come up in that story.

And I began to realize that that's where many of our cultural attitudes about work, animals, death, marriage, sexuality, suffering are involved with that story. And that these creation stories, which look like very far-away, archaic, funny old stories are in fact—  
**MOYERS:** Three thousand years old.

**PAGELS:** Yes, I mean, it looks like a sort of ridiculous story about a talking snake from some us people's point of view. But then to realize that it's still deeply involved in the way that many of us look at very fundamental parts of our experience. For better and for worse, from my point of view.

**MOYERS:** How do you explain that? Here's a story, at least 3,000 years old—they probably told it a long time before they ever wrote it down—written by the ancient Hebrews, who couldn't possibly understand our world, or ours theirs if we could meet in the two worlds, that became such a dominant, primary force in the self-consciousness of the West. How do you explain that?

**PAGELS:** One of the things that struck me, that surprised me when I began to work on this story, was to see the way that in the ancient world there was a message—there were many messages in that story, but one of the messages in that story is that God made Adam in His own image, and Adam in Hebrew meant a human being. And the statement that every human being is made in God's image, I think, proved to be explosively powerful in the Roman Empire. Because in that kind of world, three-quarters of the people were either slaves or descended from slaves, and were legally not people, not human.

And one man in the whole society was said to be made in God's image: that was the emperor. And therefore, you must obey him. But to say that every man, every woman, every slave, every child was equally made in the image of God as the emperor, and therefore of kind of ultimate value, was a powerful, radical, dramatic and extraordinary statement. And I think that's one of the reasons that this story caught on.

**MOYERS:** Not only did it catch on, it held on. "All men are created equal." Take the Declaration of Independence, the idea was there—even though you can't prove that, and nobody really believed slaves were equal—it had a powerful revolutionary hold on the American imagination.  
**PAGELS:** It was. And in the ancient times, when Jews and Christians used that story, they

never imagined that you could make a political or social reality out of it. They thought, "Well, in God's Kingdom, and before God," you know.

**MOYERS:** In the hereafter.

**PAGELS:** Right. Somehow, but before God. It was an extraordinary statement to say that all people were made in His image. But it's only, as you say, much later—maybe 1,600, 1,900 years later—that people imagined it as a political vision.

**MOYERS:** This tradition gave us a profound sense of our own individual worth, our own dignity as men and women made in the image of God. The other side of it is it did something else: I mean, in the time before the Christian Church in ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, ancient Rome, they celebrated Eros, sexual love, as divine. They didn't have the inhibitions, they didn't have the negative, pessimistic view of it that came to us through the Adam and Eve story.

**PAGELS:** Well, you say "came to us," and I think, "Who's the us?" Because if you look at the way many Jews read it, and still do, there's nothing negative about sexuality in the Adam and Eve story. It's a story about blessing, right? And procreation. I mean, the first divine commandment is "Be fruitful and multiply." So really it's an obligation to procreate. And then marriage is seen as a way of fulfilling that obligation. And sexuality in such a tradition is an instrument of blessing.

But when you say "us," and then you say Christian tradition, I think it's very true that for most Christians, for many Christians, we get it read through 2000 years of interpretation, and especially the last 1600 years since St. Augustine, read with a very negative view of sexuality.  
**MOYERS:** Why did he put this—to use the modern term of my business—why did he spin the story this way?

**PAGELS:** It would be unfair to say he was the first. There are strains in Jewish tradition that see the sexual impulse as part of what they call the evil impulse. I mean, there are Jewish sources that do that. They weren't alone in the ancient world; a lot of other people were highly suspicious of these passions that overtake the mind. But it seemed to me when I was looking at the creation story and the way the Christians interpreted it; there's a radically different attitude about sexuality one finds in Christian sources.

**MOYERS:** Explain.

**PAGELS:** Well, from the time of Jesus, it's surprising—when other Jewish teachers around Jesus' time are interpreting the story, they're usually talking about marriage and sexuality and gender and issues like that. And Jesus was no exception, because the only time that the Gospels say He ever referred to that story was when people asked Him what the grounds for divorce were. And He said, "Haven't you heard that in the beginning God made the male and female and said for this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife?" And then He adds these words, "What God has joined together, let no one separate." That's Matthew 19.

And so in Jesus's spin on the story, if you like, according to Matthew at any rate, He said that originally God had intended marriage and no possibility of divorce. No thought of procreation. And then Jesus goes on in Matthew to say that those who make themselves eunuchs or castrate themselves in effect for the sake of the Kingdom of God, are even more blessed. So there's an odd, striking, challenging difference in the way that Jesus is said to have used that story.

**MOYERS:** So many of the church fathers refer to sexual activity as, you know, as repugnant, as filthy, unseemly. This idea took over very quickly in the first two or three hundred years after Christ, about sex.

**PAGELS:** Yes, you know, I was struck because having been sort of nominally raised in the Protestant tradition, I was always sort of brought up with this attitude that Christianity affirms the world, you know, God made the world and it was good, and sexuality and all that. But when you look at the early Christian movement, it's striking how negative, in what negative terms many of them talk about sexuality.

**MOYERS:** Why? Why did that happen?

**PAGELS:** Well, I was curious about that, and also curious about why a movement that negative would be so successful. Those were the questions I started with. I think it had to do with another element of the Christian message, which was taken out of that story, too. And that's a message about human freedom. There's a statement there that God made this human pair in His image,

and it was taken to mean that they were given moral freedom. And the capacity to make moral choices was enormously valued.

**MOYERS:** Even choosing to disobey God is a moral choice.

**PAGELS:** Yes. But also choosing to transcend passion. That is, the choice to say no to natural instincts. I mean, in the movement that Jesus and Paul initiated, for many celibacy was considered to be a preferable life, if not the only life, and one for the sake of the Kingdom of God was a good choice. And it wasn't so much that the passions were evil — I think certainly you don't see that in the sayings of Jesus or Paul — but that other things were more important.

**MOYERS:** Other things being?

**PAGELS:** Human moral freedom and working for the Kingdom of God and sort of a transformed vision of human nature. And it had to do, as I began to see it, with human nature that was not bound to the old structures of the family, or the society. That is, if you're a traditionally-minded Jew or Roman or Greek, your moral obligation, or my moral obligation, would be to our families, you know; to marry properly, to bring up a family, to transmit property. To be loyal to the country and the nation and all of that. And Jesus' message in many ways was radical, you know. Leave your family—

**MOYERS:** Follow me.

**PAGELS:** —leave your wife, husband, children, father and mother, you know. Follow me. It's a very radical message. When one senses a kind of urgency, a conviction that the Kingdom of God is coming, one has to radically transform human life. And it was when that expectation that the end of time was coming soon receded that most people, most Christians, most people in that movement reverted back to normal family life, and others, trying to maintain the austerity and the challenge and the excitement of those austere and powerful sayings, followed a monastic path.

**MOYERS:** Wasn't it also true that the church, under Augustine, began to believe that because we were corrupted by birth, because we came into the world poisoned by original sin, we were not capable of self-government. And therefore we needed both the authority of the church and the state in order to govern our appetites, to check our instincts, to regulate our behavior?

**PAGELS:** Exactly. That's what surprised me so much when I was looking at the sort of pre-Augustinian Christian church, that when they talked about Adam and Eve, they saw this as a story about moral freedom, about human freedom in every form. Freedom from one's family and obligations, and freedom from passions and freedom from the Gods and freedom from the government. You know, freedom to master one's self. And with Augustine it changed completely, and he began to talk about a story of world bondage.

**MOYERS:** Bondage.

**PAGELS:** That Adam may have been free way back then, way back in the Garden, but he lost it, you know. He lost it so far back that no human being since Adam or Eve has ever been free morally in the way that he was. And that we were tainted by his misuse of freedom. And Augustine then developed an ingenious theory, if you like this sort of thing, that this moral disease that Adam generated, so he thought, was sexually transmitted. It was transmitted through semen, as he describes it. And that's why he says Jesus was the only person not infected, if you like, because He was presumably conceived without human semen. But the rest of us conceived in the usual depraved way, were infected morally by Adam's sin. And so this kind of moral problem that he felt was endemic to our condition is described in sexual terms.

**MOYERS:** And everyone thereafter was born with a fallen nature because we have been corrupted by the sexual act, right?

**PAGELS:** That's right. By the very process through which we're conceived. But as you say, I began to see this time around when I looked at this story that that is more than a psychological or theological statement. It also becomes a political statement. Because if you believe that, say, you and I are baptized Christians in the second century and therefore become moral, and achieve what God gave in creation — which is moral capacity to govern ourselves — then you don't really need an external government. You would think that now everyone could, each person could rule himself or herself, and one wouldn't need external government.

But in the fifth century, with the Christianization of the Roman Empire, there came a new theory of human nature, saying, "Aha, but you see, now we know that we're so corrupted that one has to be ruled from outside." And that was a useful strategy, if you like, for both the

church and the state to speak about the necessity of external control. And has been ever since.  
**MOYERS:** And once this union of church and state took place it was convenient for both. The church had no sword with which to enforce its orthodoxy. The state had plenty of power, but also the state needed what the church could do for it, so you had this coupling of power and theology.

**PAGELS:** That's right. For the first time, the Christian movement was no longer a persecuted sect, it was no longer a small enclave which regarded itself as a kind of island of purity against this ocean of corruption, which was the Roman Empire. Christians were everywhere. The Emperor was a Christian, many of his officials were. There was all kinds of, you know, what many regarded as corrupt official influence in the churches. And many people became aware that the kind of moral freedom that had been talked about earlier in the Christian movement wasn't as simple as it looked anymore.

And a more pessimistic, dark view of human nature in its possibilities emerged in the fourth century and afterwards. I mean, if you look at Protestant theology since John Calvin, Martin Luther, which are based on Augustine, through the modern theologians, they talk about some deep flaw in human nature. They don't talk so much about the need for government as some others do. But many people have held the pessimistic view that because we are so corrupted, we need governmental structures to prevent ourselves from tearing each other apart, devouring each other like fishes, as one Christian theologian said.

**MOYERS:** But what's exciting to me about all of this is that while people still hold to the old story and try to give it new power, there are so many people who are also searching for a new story, who are trying to develop an affirmative theology based on human freedom, to replace the negative and pessimistic theology that grew out of the old tradition.

**PAGELS:** Well, even there, that surprised me. But that has been read in the Adam and Eve story in the early centuries, that affirmative story that you're talking about.

**MOYERS:** That we were created in God's image.

**PAGELS:** Right. But on the other hand, the story that interests me most is not Adam and Eve, but the story of the history of religion, of the history of western Religion. And then there's eastern Religion. I mean, that is what interests me. How we have created these cultural traditions, how we relate to them, how we choose them, how they change.

There, there's an enormous pluralism. You know, there's an enormous range. I mean, most people, when they think of religion, think of whatever they were brought up with, or not brought up with. Looking at the exploration of the study of religion, whether it's Buddhism, or Hinduism, Islam, tribal religions, whatever, opens up a human range which is far more exciting than any of them taken separately.

**MOYERS:** What does it say about us, this story of religion?

**PAGELS:** Well, it says that there are many different ways that human beings can interpret our experience. And different ways we shape and value the world, and articulate that value. And very different attitudes people have taken about death, or life, or sexuality, or power. All kinds of realities that we confront.

**MOYERS:** You didn't find, when you went back in the early part of the church, you didn't find that golden age where Christianity existed pure and simple.

**PAGELS:** I think most people who studied the early history of Christianity are doing what I was doing, they're going back to find— they say, "Well, the Christianity around me is all these different denominations, they all say different things. But back there at the time of Jesus it was all very simple and very clear. Let's go back and find out what it was like back there, and then try that." I mean, almost every reform movement in Christianity has tried that.

And what I found when I went back there was that there was, in fact, a multiplicity of voices in the early Christian movement, just as there is today. In fact, it was very complex and multi-faceted. And then I became fascinated with that. But what the beliefs are doesn't interest me as much as the kind of issues that are raised. And simply that people engage in some way with these fundamental questions about how do you look at human nature, how do you understand our position in the universe.

**MOYERS:** But what do you see happening in our own culture? We've all heard the voices of the last several years, the conflicts within Christianity. It seems that religion is influencing our politics in ways that I would never have imagined it would have done. Do you find that?

**PAGELS:** Well, it does. In fact, when I was working on this, on second and first-century Christianity, I realized how deeply these religious traditions are embedded in the structure, the very structure of our political life, in our institutions, in our attitudes about human nature—  
**MOYERS:** Even today?

**PAGELS:** Oh, yes, absolutely.

**MOYERS:** Give me some examples of that.

**PAGELS:** Well, the way we think about choices that people make. The way we think about morality and who makes a moral judgment. I mean, for example, the way people today talk about abortion. Whether a politician thinks, for example, that every person has a right to make a choice about abortion and will probably make a reasonable, decent, moral choice given a difficult option; or others who believe that that decision must be taken out of the hands of the majority of the people, because they will abuse it.

Whether people assume that those who are traditionally enemies, like the Soviet Union, can be trusted to make judgments about their society. Whether we believe that people who have been traditionally enemies only make decisions in a Machiavellian way to trick us into letting down our national defenses, or whether in fact they may actually be changing priorities. These have to do with basic attitudes we have about whether human nature is essentially depraved and must be restrained, or whether it can be trusted. Whether we follow these sort of liberal, optimistic point of view that's expressed, say, by Thomas Jefferson, and institutionalized in some of our governmental structures.

**MOYERS:** When I watched the debate between George Bush and Michael Dukakis during the campaign, and they talked about abortion, it was very clear that they were expressing two different versions of the Christian/Judaic tradition.  
**PAGELS:** Yes.

**MOYERS:** George Bush saying, you know, "This is a matter that people can't be trusted, that women can't be trusted," and Dukakis saying, "It's a moral choice women must be trusted to make." And I thought, there's the old conflict in Christianity.  
**PAGELS:** Yes. That's what I mean, that our traditions are really pluralistic, and they have multiple possibilities within them. One of my own agendas here is to become aware that we are making choices, you know? That if we're going to take a particular position socially, politically, religiously, that we are in fact taking a position, that we do have a range of choices to make. And if we take a certain position, it's not just because it's the only one, but we are conscious of making it.

**MOYERS:** Where do you come out in the old argument? Are we by nature sinners, depraved, immoral and corrupt? Or are we by nature in the image of God, who made us to make choices morally and freely?

**PAGELS:** Well, I'm going to waffle on that, because what I find fascinating is that issue and the way it's polarized. The way that people keep arguing that question. I think it's because it's a fundamental question. At certain times each of those seems more valid than it does at others. I mean, if you ask in a certain situation like—look at some of the aftermath of the Second World War, you would say human nature is essentially corrupt. In another circumstance, one would come up with a very different point of view. I think both are true.

**MOYERS:** That humans are corrupt, and human beings are moral?

**PAGELS:** Yes. But, you see, it's not as simple as either view would claim.  
**MOYERS:** I still prefer Milton's description of Adam and Eve as the story of man's first disobedience. I don't know why I prefer that story. I guess I prefer it more than I want to believe that we are by nature corrupt. I believe we are limited creatures, but I do not believe we're evil creatures. And you can carry Augustine to the point of evil in a way that I think undermines the human dignity. I don't want to believe that. I don't believe it. But I do find there's something about our need to disobey and our act of will that defies God that is very endemic to being a human being.

**PAGELS:** Yes. That's why I said I have to take both. You know, it's like one side or the other doesn't make up anything like an adequate human psychology. There's so much in Augustine, powerful. And very compelling.

**MOYERS:** But do you consider yourself religious?

**PAGELS:** Yes, kind of incorrigibly. Just kind of naturally, you know.  
**MOYERS:** Augustinian?

**PAGELS:** Not Augustinian. No, I'm afraid, not Augustinian.

**MOYERS:** No, I mean, incorrigibly. He said you couldn't change once you have sinned.  
**PAGELS:** Well, no, no. I sort of think of it sometimes as a taste for music. I mean, there are people who can take music or leave it. And there are other people who just love it, and they can't really live without it. And I find religion is that way for me. All of my background was not particularly religious. It was kind of liberal ex-Protestant. But I do love to engage the history of religion.

**MOYERS:** But you do say in the last paragraph, in fact, that one thing you came away with was the new recognition of the spiritual dimension in our human experience.

**PAGELS:** Yes. That is what I couldn't stay away from. I mean, that's what fascinates me, is looking at how people deal with a spiritual dimension in their life. How they image it, how they argue about it. You see what I mean? That they engage it, that I engage it, is the most interesting thing to me about this work. It's not only for people who are explicitly religious, but for people who are not, it's an exploration of how human beings think, how cultures develop, how societies articulate their values. For both people who are religious and people who are not, I find the study of religion enormously exciting. And precisely at a time when many people are no longer traditionally religious, one can look at these traditions with very new eyes.

**MOYERS:** /voice-over/ We will continue this conversation on Thursday, when Elaine Pagels talks about what the story of Adam and Eve has taught her about being a woman, and about suffering. I'm Bill Moyers.

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