

THURSDAY, APRIL 06, 2006

The 'gospel' of Judas

From Zenit:

The National Geographic Society has announced its intentions to publish an English translation of an ancient text called "The Gospel of Judas" later this month.

The 31-page manuscript, written in Coptic, purportedly surfaced in Geneva in 1983 and has only been translated now.

ZENIT asked Legionary **Father Thomas D. Williams**, dean of theology at the Regina Apostolorum university in Rome, to comment on the relevance of the discovery.

Q: What is the "Gospel of Judas"?

Father Williams: Though the manuscript still must be authenticated, it likely represents a fourth- or fifth-century text, and is a copy of an earlier document produced by a Gnostic sect called the Cainites.

The document paints Judas Iscariot in a positive light, and describes him as obeying a divine ordinance in handing over Jesus to the authorities for the salvation of the world.

It may well be a copy of the "Gospel of Judas" referred to by St. Irenaeus of Lyons in his work "Against the Heresies," written around A.D. 180.

Q: If authentic, what challenge would this document pose to traditional Christian belief? Will it "shake Christianity to its foundations" as some press releases have suggested?

Father Williams: Certainly not. The Gnostic gospels, of which there are many besides this one, are not Christian documents per se, since they

proceed from a syncretistic sect that incorporated elements from different religions, including Christianity.

From the moment of their appearance, the Christian community rejected these documents because of their incompatibility with the Christian faith.

The "Gospel of Judas" would be a document of this sort, which could have great historical value, since it contributes to our knowledge of the Gnostic movement, but it poses no direct challenge to Christianity.

Q: Is it true that the Church has tried to cover up this text and other apocryphal texts?

Father Williams: These are myths circulated by Dan Brown and other conspiracy theorists.

You can go to any Catholic bookstore and pick up a copy of the Gnostic gospels. Christians may not believe them to be true, but there is no attempt to hide them.

Q: But doesn't an early document of this sort rival orthodox Christian sources, such as the four canonical Gospels?

Father Williams: Remember that Gnosticism arose in the middle of the second century, and the "Gospel of Judas," if authentic, probably dates back to the mid- to late second century.

To put a historical perspective on things, that would be like you or me writing a text now on the American Civil War and having that text later used as a primary historical source on the war. The text could not have been written by eyewitnesses, the way at least two of the canonical Gospels were.

This Gnostic stuff keeps resurfacing periodically. Of course it never had

the kind of exposure it does now, with everyone and their uncle having read the Da Vinci Code.

*posted by Gerald Augustinus at **11:38 AM***