

Jesus

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In a recent study, *The Human Christ*, Charlotte Allen writes,

In 1909, the Modernist Catholic theologian George Tyrrell complained that the liberal German biblical scholars of his day had reconstructed a historical Jesus who was no more than "The reflection of a liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well." In other words, the liberal searchers had found a liberal Jesus. The same can be said of the Jesus-searchers of every era: The deists found a deist, the Romantics a Romantic, the existentialists an existentialist, and the liberationists a Jesus of class struggle. Supposedly equipped with the latest critical and historical tools, the "scientific" quest for the historical Jesus has nearly always devolved into theology, ideology, and even autobiography. (P. 5)

This has been widely recognized as being the case and I readily acknowledge it to be operative in my own reflection on the identity, life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.

This criticism has been met head on by a contemporary Jesus scholar recognized for both the breadth of his research into Christian origins, cross-cultural studies, and carefully articulated methodology. John Dominic Crossan, in his *The Birth of Christianity* (1998), cites a poem, "For Once, Then, Something," by Robert Frost,

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs
Always wrong to the light, so never seeing
Deeper down in the well than where the water
Gives me back in a shining surface picture ,
Me myself in the summer heaven, godlike,
Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.
Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,

Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
Something more of the depths - and then I lost it.

Crossan comments,

There is an oft-repeated and rather cheap gibe that historical Jesus researchers are simply looking down a deep well and seeing their own reflections from below. I call it cheap for three reasons. First, those who use it against others seldom apply it to themselves. Second, it is almost impossible to imagine a reconstruction that could not be dismissed by the assertion of that gibe. Your Jesus is an apocalyptic: You are bemused by the approaching millennium,... What could anyone ever say that would not fall under that ban? Third, those who repeat that taunt so readily must never have looked down a deep well or heeded Emily Dickinson's warning (3.970, no. 1400):

What mystery pervades a well!...
But nature is stranger yet;
The ones that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house,
Nor simplified her ghost.

Crossan continues,

Imagine two alternative and opposite modes of historical reconstruction, one an impossible delusion, the other a possible illusion. The possible illusion is narcissism. You think you are seeing the past or the other when all you see is your own reflected present. You see only what was there before you began. You imprint your own present on the past and call it history. Narcissism sees its own face, and, ignoring the water that shows it up, falls in love with itself. It is the first of the twin images in Frost's poem. It is when,

...the water
Gives me back in a shining surface picture
Me myself in the summer heaven, godlike,
Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.

The impossible delusion is positivism. It imagines that you can know the past without any interference from your own personal and social situation as answer. You can see, as it were, without your own eye being involved. You can discern the past once and for all forever and see it pure and uncontaminated by that discernment. Positivism is the delusion that we can see the water without our own face being mirrored in it. It thinks we can see the surface without simultaneously seeing our own eyes. It is the

second of the twin images in Frost's poem. It is when, even if only once, uncertainly, possibly, and vaguely,

I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
Something more of the depths - and then I lost it.

But, I would ask, if the poet's face is white, how did it see "through the picture" of itself "a something white" that was also "beyond the picture"? Maybe what it saw was its own face so strangely different that it did not recognize it. That introduces a third image not given but provoked by Frost's second image.

There is, therefore, a third alternative, and I'll call it interactivism, which is, incidentally, the way I understand post-modernism. The past and present must interact with one another, each changing and challenging the other, and the ideal is an absolutely fair and equal reaction between one another. Back to the well: You cannot see the surface without simultaneously seeing, disturbing, and distorting your own face; you cannot see your own face without simultaneously seeing, disturbing, and distorting the surface. It is the third image begging to be recognized behind the two overt ones in Frost's poem. What the poet saw was his own face so strangely different that he did not recognize it as such. It was, indeed "something white" and "something more of the depths." But it was not "beyond the picture" or even "through the picture." It was the picture itself changed utterly. That is the dialectic of interactivism and, as distinct from either narcissism or positivism, it is both possible and necessary. (Pp. 40f.)

After illustrating his claim, Crossan writes,

Historical reconstruction is always interactive of present and past. Even our best theories and methods are still our best ones. They are all dated and doomed not just when they are wrong but even (and especially) when they are right. They need, when anything important is involved, to be done over and over again. That does not make history worthless. We ourselves are also dated and doomed, but that does not make life worthless. (P. 45)

Crossan does not speak of "search" or "quest" of Christian origins. That he sees as positivistic. Rather, he attempts a reconstruction and that, he says, must be done over and over again in different times and different places by different groups and different communities.

I cite Crossan and Allen to acknowledge that "my Jesus" is not "The Jesus" of history. That Jesus cannot be definitively recovered. Allen's comment about the well has been the easy way to write off the quest. Crossan knows the danger but I

think has, through careful method, eliminated some of the naiveté of earlier efforts.

Even before the critique of mentors Duncan and Lester, I was aware that I was replicating the 19th-century liberal Jesus in some respects, but I was also aware that I had to move through that stage. It is not quite accurate, however, to identify the Jesus I have been attempting to reconstruct with that "Jesus, meek and mild."

Several issues are involved in my movement from the classical Christological creedal affirmations to Jesus as a human being as the incarnation or embodiment of God or Spirit. I have been working at dismantling the creedal Christ for some time. (Theological reflection is really my focus rather than historical research or even biblical research.) But to dismantle the Christological formulae leaves me with an historical figure and the need to give some content to this figure.

Another piece of the traditional orthodox understanding that I have for some years now moved away from is the idea of Jesus' death as atoning, making salvation possible and available. If Jesus did not come into the world to die for human sin, that is, if he is not a salvific figure, what came to expression in his life and teaching and why was he executed?

Here is where the work of Crossan and Borg has been helpful to me. By recognizing the Jewishness of Jesus, putting him in his historical context through reconstruction of first-century Judaism under Roman domination and cross-cultural studies, there emerges a picture of Jesus as social prophet in the Hebrew tradition who, through non-violent protest, stands against the structural injustice and systemic evil of his society in the name of the God of Israel who is marked by the demand for justice and compassion.

This is not the highly moral and gentle Jesus of the 19th century. This one dies the way he dies because he lived the way he lived. I will not go on to argue this, but I think it can be given good biblical support as well as being consistent with our best sense of his social/economic/political context.

Why bother so strenuously with Jesus? It is claimed the idea, the meaning of the whole historical/legendary/mythological phenomenon could simply be "thought," conceived by one who contemplated the whole human-divine relationship. Perhaps so. It is claimed Newton's whole grand mechanical model of the universe was a product not of empirical experimentation but of pure thought.

But, as a matter of fact, the whole Christian tradition (including its Jewish womb) emerged in history. The "story" is rooted in history and the liturgical and ritual practice represent history as shaped by the early (biblical) interpretations. And story and ritual are critical for creating community -meaning is conveyed in the

telling and action. As Whitehead claimed, it takes centuries to form such tradition.

Thus, it seems to me that it is valuable to re-tell the old story and through serious research I think we can uncover that which provides the data by which to reconstruct this historical person who can credibly be offered as an embodiment of the love, grace, compassion and justice of God.

The canonical Jesus, however, is no longer believable to one for whom biblical authority in the sense of authoritarian claim is no longer valid. We know the Jesus of the Gospels is the post-Easter Jesus of the early communities. The Christological titles ascribed to him post-Easter are ascriptions of faith arising out of the experience of those early believers.

This is where biblical criticism becomes crucial. To be sure, determining which words and deeds go back to Jesus and which are "history metaphorized" by the biblical writers is an inexact science and total agreement will never be achieved. And it is also true that here one's presuppositions - maybe one's intuition - will operate in the selection process. But the moment one decides that the biblical text is not the word of God given by whatever process to the writer, but rather, a human book reflecting the religious experience or revelatory encounter of the writer, one cannot avoid such a discriminating approach to the text.

The reconstruction will be the result of the engagement with the text, interaction with the text and the best one can do is be aware of one's pre-understanding and endeavor as honestly as possible to hear the text.

Now, in regard to the concatenation of texts gathered by Lester, I obviously hear the voice of the early communities. There is sharp debate as to whether Jesus held the apocalyptic view. I think he moved away from John the Baptist because he did not share that view. If he did think of himself as returning in clouds of heaven soon, of course he was simply wrong - as was Paul! In any case, I would argue that the Jesus of my reconstruction is not a candidate for Rotary.

I have explained above why I do not simply shake loose of Jesus - he roots our story, concretizes the image of God. But, I think the Spirit has been embodied in others whose lives shine with revelatory luminosity. And further, I believe that which came to intense expression in him is the truth for all of us - if we have eyes to see it, and seeing it is salvation here and now, knowing the miracle, wonder and glory of being alive, and that's not bad for one without Christology, an authoritative scripture, doctrine of atonement, or ecclesiastical credential!

References:

Charlotte Allen. *The Human Christ: The Search for the Historical Jesus*. FreePress, 1998.

John Dominic Crossan. *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus*. HarperOne, 1999.