

Changing Jesus: Changing Values

An Educated Layman's View

Even if we do not subscribe to the conventional belief in the divinity of Christ we live in a Western World still saturated with effects of that belief, held for the last fifteen hundred years and more. We cannot escape the various conceptions of Jesus that affect the thinking, feeling and behaviour of so many of those around us. It may therefore be very important that we do not go to sleep on how and why current scholarship is changing its views of that nebulous man of Israel.

Most stories and myths convey messages about wishes, possibilities and, above all about what we call values to us as children and to us adult children. For example the ancient Greek story of Androcles, the hunter, and the Lion whom he braved to draw a thorn from its paw, read at age six, made a life-long impact on me and it teaches us primarily about courage and compassion but also about the vulnerability of the most powerful and about gratitude. As adults we all recognise a range of abstract values like these and can bring them to bear on a host of situations, everyday and unusual. But the stories teach children by illustration.

In all cultures, around the world and for as far back as we can trace, teaching about desirable and undesirable behaviour has always mostly been done by such myths and stories. Many of us as adults have such a good flexible grasp of these values of

our particular culture that we habitually think in abstracts and may have little time for the stories except as entertainment, but we all learned our values through stories and concrete examples.

Jesus as Iconic Role Model The tales of Jesus and of Mohammed have been prime teachers of values throughout the centuries like the medieval morality plays and the tales of the saints were and the soaps of today are. All cultures use figures in this way, the prophet in Islam, the Buddha, and more prosaically and deliberately, the royal family and Mrs Dale's Diary were used in this way in the nineteen fifties. Jesus Christ has traditionally been used in our culture as the ultimate ethical role model, the personification of the values through which moral education is delivered. And the image of the historical Jesus has always been sufficiently vague, like a formless ink-blot in a psychological test, to allow a variety of personal ideals. For example the hymn "When Jesus walked the Earth" (Hymns for Living 99, 1985) conveys a powerful message about values, possibly that courage, power and law and order, or even effort, all matter less than friendliness, compassion, nurturance and, above all, less than whatever we may think we might mean by 'love'.

Hans Kung, in his masterpiece "On Being a Christian" (Kung, Hans, 1978, On Being a Christian.) writes a famous passage on the various images of Jesus current from time to time down the ages. "Christian experiences of the one Christ can be very different. And the same experiences can be for some the

reason why they have kept the Christian faith and for others, the reason why they have given it up. There are Christians who got to know Christ at an early date as the pious, ever friendly Divine Saviour and have never parted from this "sweet Jesus": consequently the social-critical (image of) Jesus.... leaves them anxious and disturbed". "Is it the beardless, young-looking, kindhearted shepherd of the early Christian art of the catacombs or is it the bearded emperor and ruler of the world, in the image forms of the imperial cult of late antiquity in courtly rigid inviolability and menacing majesty beneath the gold background of eternity? ...Is it Christ the King and Judge of the world, enthroned on the cross, on Romanesque portals and apses or the cruelly realistic suffering Christ in Durer's Christus im Elend?" "Is it the meek and mild human Jesus of the German and French Nazarenes and the English pre-Raphaelites?" "It seems there are as many images of Christ as there are minds. Even today piety provides very diverse answers to the question; "Which Christ? What does he mean for me?" For some he signifies love, meaning, support, ground in life, and is the embodiment of happiness, calm and consolation even in disappointments, in despair and suffering. For others he is harmless, means little, cannot help. And if he challenges some to reflection, meditation, adoring contemplation, others respond tersely, are even irritated, avoid the issue or are simply at a loss." (B; I; 2 Which Christ? Pp. 126-133)

The Search for the Jesus of History Leaving aside the grand narrative of the creation and the fall, of Judean prophets

fulfilled in the Divine Christ what are still being played out among the scholars of the twenty first century are questions about the nature and significance of the Jesus, the man, of the historical Jesus.

In the 18th century the first attempt to write a life of Jesus stripped of all the miracles, amazing events and superstitions which so offended the rationalist thinkers of the day (Boulton, 2008, pp.15-16) led to the beginning of the long quest for the historical Jesus. The main tools of that historical quest were what was, and still is, called the Lower Criticism and the Higher Criticism. Through the Lower Criticism scholars painstakingly examined the text as they would any other historical document that they knew had been written by an unknown, checking sentence length, vocabulary, use of habitual idioms of speech and favourite phrases. Essentially that is what the Lower Critics did to the New Testament. They identified huge chunks of it that were not consistent with the style of the alleged writer of most of that particular book and so they labelled much of it as interpolated by some other author to make a point important to him - and hence as inauthentic. Through the Higher Criticism the total message was examined in the context of what was known about the thinking and beliefs of the time that might have coloured the text but can no longer apply in our times. And again large sections were clearly seen as later interpolations by someone making points from the arguments of a later age rather than from the times of Jesus himself. This Quest for the historical Jesus has gone through many stages. For many decades of the twentieth century the developing

story rested with Albert Schweitzer's amazing book "The Quest for the Historical Jesus" in which he thought he had uncovered a man who thought that the end of the world was immediately immanent with the coming of the Kingdom of God and who preached an ethic which was designed to lived for a short time until that happened. But there is now little doubt of the rejection of the picture of Jesus painted by Weiss and Schweitzer in 1906 (Schweitzer, 1968) as what the non-realists call "the apocalyptic fanatic". These apocalyptic sayings came from the propagandists of the early Christian faith and, like most of the miracles, were written into the Gospels by them.

The Time Gap in the Transmission of the 'Real Jesus' There is a reassuring consensus among all scholars, even among the fundamentalists, that Jesus died in the third decade of the first century of the Common Era – around 30 CE or slightly after it. The first writings of the New Testament are now widely agreed to be those of Paul – no later than 53 CE, or even as early as 51 CE, i.e. some twenty plus years after the death of Christ when Peter and James were still living in Jerusalem where Paul writes in Galatians that he twice visited them. He would surely have heard the story of death and resurrection from the living memory of those who knew Jesus. Paul simply asserts that Jesus was crucified – no resurrection! A little later, about 65 CE, in his most detailed account, Paul simply states that "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" and again "He was buried."

The earliest gospel narrative that we have is that attributed to Mark – generally agreed to have been written in the early part of the seventh decade, i.e. some time around 75 CE (after the death, it should be noted, of both Peter and Paul). The gospel attributed to Mathew came next – probably about 95 CE – and Luke was written sometime later – certainly in the next century, possibly about 105 CE with John following later still. Puzzlingly to some, Paul appears to know nothing of the story of the crucifixion as told later in Mark and elaborated in Mathew, Luke and John. Yet it appears in full bloom in Mark about twenty years later.

I had always assumed until now that stories of Jesus and parts of his teachings were circulating orally, by word of mouth, during those vital years between the events themselves and the first writings. Perhaps parents told stories to their children or people discussed Jesus with their neighbours or over the back fence in a desultory way. Human memory in the process of recall, as can be shown any day in a repeat of Bartlett's experiment in the Psychological Laboratory at Cambridge, misses out what does not fit in with its current beliefs and understanding and it puts in bits where the story needs making some more sense. It is both creative and selective. We all know the game of Chinese Whispers and how it can distort an original story almost out of all recognition. I, and many others like me, assumed that the Jesus stories developed as any folk legend might be expected to do – that is accordance with the previous capacity for understanding and the belief systems of those who passed it on.

So in that vital time-gap between the death of the historical Jesus and the writing of the first gospels which signalled the beginning of the Christ myth, anything could have happened to any form of historical truth. It looked like we would never know what happened.

But this assumption was cleverly attacked in 2003 by James Dunn, Emeritus Lightfoot Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham. (Dunn, J. D. G. 2003 and 2005) He contends that the model for understanding what happened in that vital oral time-gap should not be the Chinese Whispers of the Cambridge psychologists but rather how folk lore is preserved and transmitted in some modern Middle Eastern villages. The scriptures should be treated as a carefully memorised litany of teachings which the disciples began putting together during Jesus' ministry. As in the illiterate sub-cultures of the Middle Eastern villages of today, he contends, the sayings and acts of Jesus would be consolidated and publicly corrected by continual repetition and performance until they were eventually committed to text as an authorised and reliable account. Absolute literal word for word accuracy is not claimed but it is strongly contended that the themes of the stories or their core elements will have been preserved accurately during the oral time-gap.

Most modern biblical scholars disagree and point to the instability and creativity of oral traditions (Boulton, 2008), but both the Vatican and Christian right of the USA have seized on

his arguments. I have to leave the experts in the transmission of folk-lore in illiterate cultures to argue these points out among themselves but, for me, a different set of insights sweep all this argument away.

Other Recent Insights Even those of us who had the least biblical exposure will be familiar with phrases from the gospels such as “This was done that the scriptures might be fulfilled.” We were taught that prophetic foretellings of the life and death of Jesus miraculously came true. But it is now contended that, far from that pattern of causation, the early Christians searched the Hebrew scriptures for clues to interpret the life of Jesus and then wrote his life to conform with these scriptures. According to this proposition, beautifully expounded by Spong (2007), the whole direction of causation is reversed. Instead of prophetic foretellings of the life and death of Jesus bringing about fulfilment, the gospels were written long after his life and death to match the Hebrew scripture which had been trawled for prophecies which might explain the stories.

Other illuminating new insights have come from the realisations that the Gospel of Mark was designed to provide readings for the Jewish liturgy throughout the liturgical year but was not quite long enough for that so Mathew expanded his Gospel to make it cover the whole year. Also Mark organised the story of the crucifixion on a twenty four hour cycle to fit the liturgy of observance of a vigil of eight watches based on the three hour segments of time used in the celebration of the Jewish Passover.

Those early writers of Mark, Mathew and Luke were not deliberately perpetrating a fraud in 21st century terms. They were, most probably, trying to make sense of a powerful memory and building a personality cult which encapsulated a new sense of the values of non-exclusiveness and equality, values which had an explosive energetic effect in the ancient world or Jewish elitism and Roman authoritarianism. And they were doing it with the tools of their tradition in an imaginative and creative way – almost like playwrights.

After Vespasian and Titus destroyed Jerusalem around 70CE, Jewry became something you did not want to be identified with for good social, safety and economic reasons so as gentile proselytes drifted away from the synagogues to form new faith communities of their own and simultaneously the more conservative orthodox Jews threw out the Christian heresy, the rejected joined these new separate communities of faith. All this was greatly helped by St Paul and the Hellenisation of Christianity. And once Christianity had escaped the narrow confines of the synagogue and the Jewish race, the way was opened for the Hellenistic mystery cults that we find at the time of the Nag Hammadi scrolls (Robinson, 1990, Ehrman, 2003) and their extension into cosmic myths of dying and rising gods and saviour cults as outlined in Freke and Gandi (1999, 2001).

The Jesus Seminars The Jesus Seminars were planned in 1979, first met in 1985 and only completed the first phase of their work in 1999 with the publication of “The Gospel of Jesus

According to the Jesus Seminar” (Funk, 1999). They began with a new translation of the gospels which they have published under the name of The Scholar’s Version (Miller, 1992). This version is the first ever translation to be made free of any religious or ecclesiastical control unlike every other major English translation including the King James Version, the Catholic versions and the New International Version which is evangelical. The Scholar’s Version is authorised by scholars and it includes direct translations, sometimes into the colloquialisms of the originals, of documents not hitherto included in the accepted canon of “The Bible” as we have known it.

There is a core of about seventy five professional scholars who are regular participants in the Jesus Seminars and they are mainly based in the Universities of the USA, including both Catholic and Protestant scholars. But more than two hundred professional scholars have been Fellows and have taken part in their deliberations and these include our own Karen Armstrong, our own Don Cupitt and our own Richard Holloway who are all still Fellows. The Seminars meet twice a year and all participants are supplied beforehand with the learned discourses relevant to the subjects they are to vote on. After short debates, they have voted on over fifteen hundred phrases from the gospels, using beads to signify their opinions of their authenticity as sayings or doings of the real historical Jesus. No attempt was made to agree on the interpretation of the sayings or acts, merely on their authenticity. Each scholar put a red bead in the box if he or she believed the saying or act

in question is most probably authentic; a pink bead if it could be authentic; a grey bead if it is seen as not very likely to be authentic and a black bead if it is fairly certainly not authentic.

Funk, the organiser reports (2001) that the scholars began thinking that narrative framework of the New Testament gospels was essentially fictional and that a large number of the legendary stories were inventions suggested by the cultural milieu in which the gospel was being promulgated. They saw the Gospels as first century religious propaganda designed to persuade and convert. “Miraculous births, mountain top revelations, voices from the sky, martyr's deaths, and immortality were all themes alive and well in popular culture in the Roman first century.”

Funk goes on to say “Within individual stories and miniature collections of sayings, however, are pearls of wisdom that contrast starkly with the surrounding prosaic terrain. We discovered the parables originally with the help of the new criticism, which enabled us to recognize these short, short stories as works of literary art with their own integrity. As critics bent on escaping from the literalist/dogmatic reading of them, we learned to read them non-literally at more than one level. We took them to be astute observations on the ordinary and everyday. They were so constructed as to satirize the received world and contrast it with Jesus' vision of a counter-reality.” “Later we discovered the aphorism, the twin of the parable. The aphorism is subversive of conventional wisdom and thus of the proverb. It undermines the old traditions,

religious, social, political. Familiarity has robbed us of the ability to see that "Love your enemies" is incomprehensible in a tribal society. We no longer appreciate the fact that "Congratulations, you poor! God's domain belongs to you" is a huge irony for those who sought the restoration of the Davidic kingdom. Fragments like these provided us with the essential clues. We followed them up diligently, rigorously, item by item through more than 1500 versions. A glimpse of the historical figure began to emerge, and he was not at all what the orthodox tradition had taught us to expect or indeed what we had learned to expect from our mentors."

Through the Jesus Seminars the collection of authentic sayings and acts is agreed but the interpretation, the meaning for us, of what is accepted as authentic is far from finished and is developing all the time.

The Emerging New Picture So what is the picture of the man, the historical Jesus, that emerges? There are still many competing interpretations as is evidenced by the publication in 2002 of the book entitled 'Profiles of Jesus' (Hoover, 2002) to which fourteen of the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar have each contributed their personal view of this nebulous figure. According to the majority of the Jesus Seminar, Jesus was an itinerant sage who shared meals with social outcasts and practised healing without the use of ancient medicine or magic, relieving afflictions we now consider psychosomatic. He did not walk upon water, feed the multitude with loaves and fishes, change water into wine, or raise Lazarus from the dead. He

was arrested in Jerusalem and crucified by the Romans as a public nuisance, not for claiming to be the Son of God. The empty tomb is a fiction – Jesus did not rise bodily from the dead and belief in the resurrection is based on the visionary experiences of Peter, Paul and Mary. (Borg, 1994, 2006)

It seems that one broadly agreed interpretation of these new discoveries is that Jesus the man took an unusual and quite subversive view of the society and the world of his day. The ‘Kingdom of God’ is not seen so much as an end of the world soon to come (Miller, 2001). Rather the Kingdom of God” is now understood more as a presently existent different way of looking at the world of men and women – well, presently existent for Jesus place and time in first century Roman dominated Palestine. Marcus Borg who wrote the book ‘Meeting Jesus again for the First Time’ (1994) is one of the most popular and prolific of the expositors of this view. He sees Jesus as not even a peasant, but as a landless artisan with connections with Hellenistic culture nearby in Capernaum. He is now seen as a teacher of wisdom in the Jewish traditions of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, using the classic oral forms of wisdom speech (parables and memorable short sayings known as aphorisms). Borg also, in common with the rest of the Jesus Seminar, sees Jesus as a person with an experiential awareness of the reality of his God. But his God seems to have been not so much the traditional powerful patriarchal enforcer of rules and boundaries, a savage masculine warrior God who supports his people, (an instigator of genocide) but rather a compassionate nourisher, sustainer, encourager,

creative developer of people in a much more feminine way. And Borg sees Jesus as what he calls 'a spirit person – one who spoke, not in the name of God, but with his own inner authority of the spirit within. This Jesus was engaged in an argument within Judaism that also just happened to have implications for the Graeco-Roman world within which his Judaism was embedded – and so probably sealed his fate. He is seen as a social prophet similar to the classic forms of the prophets of Israel who criticised the economic, political and religious elites of his time and an advocate of an alternative social vision and was frequently in conflict with authority. In particular he attacked the whole purity system of the dominant Jewish law of his time (Patterson, 2002).

Purity cultures are often found in anthropology. They represent attempts at ordering the social (not to mention the physical) world. They create social systems in which everything and everyone has a place, from the modern economics of the division of labour, through the feudal hierarchies of medieval Europe, and the common Neolithic division of the social world into priests, warriors, craftsmen, traders and peasants, through to the extremes of the rigid caste systems of Hindu India and the untouchables. They can also be seen as domination systems through which some sections of a culture (usually the priests and the warriors) dominate the others. Jesus' attack on the purity social systems of this time was based on his constant advocacy of equality and compassion. The central proclamation of these values in a very concrete way was in his eating and living

habits - especially in his eating habits. His all-inclusive meals with tax gatherers, prostitutes, sinners (meaning 'dirty people, impure people') were anathema to the Jewish establishment and his discipleship of equals was inclusive of women, the poor, the maimed and the marginalised (as well as some people of stature who found his stance attractive). All of this was highly disturbing to a rigidly patriarchal system and, by implication, undermined the dominance of the Roman rule. He attacked the central values of the conventional wisdom of his culture – family, wealth, honour, purity and religiosity. Some of his most radical sayings were directed against the patriarchal family which, in his culture, was the centre of both identity and material security. Jesus spoke of hating and of leaving family and his own family turned up on occasion to rescue him because they believed he was mad. He saw wealth as a preoccupation and an idolatry and he ridiculed those who were concerned with honour and purity. The overtly religious were ridiculed. Borg writes “No wonder that those who were secure in the world of conventional wisdom found little worthwhile in his message and much that was nonsensical, offensive and threatening.”

Perhaps most interesting to me are some of the emerging views of Jesus's ethics. There is little evidence that Jesus thought abstractly within an oral culture talking mainly with peasants who thought, like him, in the concrete, in the specific. There are strong arguments to support the view that Jesus was not really interested in morals. Many of his acts and sayings are in direct subversion of the dominant moral systems of his

day. His treatment of the woman at the well is obvious. Even some of his best known sayings that support the Victorian view of him as 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' (or what Swinburne rejected as 'That pale Galilean') take on completely different interpretations when seen in the context of this times. As Walter Wink, one of the Fellows of the Seminar contended, (1984) "Turning the other cheek to a 'superior' who has backhanded an 'inferior' could be, and is more likely to be, an act of defiance, not submission (a bit like the Glaswegian fist to one's own jaw which means 'go on, hit me and see what happens', or perhaps less aggressively but no less provocatively, 'that didn't hurt, try harder'); stripping naked when a creditor demands one's outer garment in payment brings down shame on the head of the creditor for causing the poor debtor's nakedness; carrying a soldier's pack a second mile would put him in violation of military law." Wink sees Jesus's total project as the overcoming of the Domination system itself. Jesus is "an egalitarian prophet who repudiates the very premises on which the Domination system is based; the right of someone to lord it over others by means of power, wealth, shaming or titles." For Jesus, it is argued, the hierarchy is to be overturned and the Godhead is not the source of cleanliness and order but is itself unclean. Now, for a first century Jew that was indeed a radical and disturbing thought!

There is no space here to illustrate how he used irony, wit, ridicule and satire in short memorable sayings for a people who spoke and remembered but did not read or write. He

shook people up, showed them new angles on old familiar things, shook them out of a lazy acceptance of conventional views – views of the animal, vegetable and mineral worlds, but especially of the human (very similar to the effects of Socrates, who also died at the hand of the authorities)(Funk, 2002).

So this Jesus of the Seminars comes across as an ironical, witty, wise-cracking, folksy, satirical, subversive, concrete-thinking, apparently unethical, Jewish landless artisan, speaking to the peasants of his time and place, a radical challenger of his status quo. There is a touch of eccentricity and anarchy about the emerging picture. I suspect the hippies of yesterday might have said “Weird, man, weird, but you are one of us” although I think he carried a much more serious and powerful message than most hippies. But does this picture call out from me the kind of Jesus-olatry that often seems to pervade Christianity – sometimes even when it rejects his full divinity? The answer is “No”. But then the other images of Jesus never did either.

Nevertheless this is a much more interesting personality type than most other images of Jesus project. The values implied and conveyed within it are very different.

Contrasting the New Values with the Old So, to come back to the story of Androcles and the learning of values through religion, one set of values taught through the Bible of my childhood were about a Judeao-Christian father-figure of cruel law-enforcing judgement, who sent, as Robert Burns wrote,

'ane to Heaven and ten to Hell', the Cosmic Christ, part of the divine Godhead. Submission, obedience, meticulous subservience were necessary to save your soul for eternity and saving your soul was the main business of life, thus promoting self love and selfishness as the primary value. I well remember being baffled by the saying attributed to Jesus "For he that shall save his soul shall lose it". What was I supposed to do! That was really unfair to make life so difficult!

Another completely contradictory set of values taught through the New Testament of my childhood were about some impossible dream of total love. God, and especially Jesus, was supposed to be about total sacrificial love. But I could see the cruelty and destructiveness of an omnipotent God all around me – not to mention the hardness of heart of church goers. Another impossible paradox.

And then there were the values of Swinburne's Pale Galileean - non violent, sexless and anaemic.

The values that seem to me to be taught through the emerging pictures of the Jesus of history of the seminars are an interesting new galaxy. Eccentricity, originality, questioning and defiance of authority, compassion and egalitarianism are all up there as important. But conventional conformity, family, wealth, honour, purity and overt religiosity seem out. Does that mean that people like me can identify ourselves as Christians once again?

But the Jesus-figure has largely lost its place as the iconic role model for desirable behaviour, ethics and values in our culture today. So perhaps today's examination of changing values embodied in the Jesus of history is nothing like as important to today's children as it was to the children of before the nineteen sixties.

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