

Religion NOW

A Paper for Post-Modern Religion

Volume 1

May, 1994

Issue 2

In Search of Jesus Christ

The Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith are two separate beings, with quite different stories. The church through the centuries has elaborated the second and most of us are familiar with it. In it the the humanity of Jesus has been frozen into cold concepts and images that have lost their ability to move people. The image of Jesus as the pale Galilean with a halo, the ghastly figure in torment on the cross, the distant supernatural divinity with no humanity about him has become the forgotten man of our time.

The story of the baby being born in a stable at Bethlehem because there was no room for him at the inn is one of the most powerful myths ever given to the human race. Even the Bible doesn't say he was born in a stable. Christmas scenes today come not from history, nor Scripture, but from folk-lore.

The real Jesus, the Jesus of history, was unlikely to have been born in Bethlehem, but likely in Galilee where he grew up.

The Christ of Faith is a mythological Jesus, believed pre-existent as the second person of the trinity, born in a stable, instituted the Christian eucharist, and founded the catholic church. Much is known, written, preached and taught about this Jesus.

This article is not dealing with the Christ of Faith but with the Jesus of History. Modern studies which include much greater knowledge of the original writings of the Bible and other Christian literature of the time, assisted by continuing archaeological

findings, and wider scholarly collaboration, are giving us glimpses of the man Jesus may have originally been.

What picture is emerging?

Jesus was a first century Jew. He was a Galilean holy man. He followed in the Hebrew prophetic tradition. He had particular and insightful concepts of people's relationship with God. He had charismatic powers of healing.

He was born in Galilee, around 7 B.C.E. (Before Common Era). Like other Galileans he appears to have visited the neighbouring province of Judaea, where he met his death at the hands of the Romans in about 30 C.E..

He wrote no books.

There is no physical description left of him.

We do not know if he was married. Likely he was.

(Jesus, contin'd)

A careful analysis of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, along with manuscripts and archaeological findings related to the time give us a picture of Jesus that is more meaningful than the descriptions passed on to us by Christian belief.

The question of a historical Jesus was not raised until after the Reformation. In 1553, the Spanish Protestant theologian Michael Servetus was burned at the stake in Geneva on the orders of John Calvin for denying the divinity of Jesus and calling him a prophet.

The 18th century produced critical Bible study and rational explanations of the miracles and divine manifestations began to be raised.

The search for the historical Jesus was impaired and the findings distorted because the overwhelming number of scholars held a smoldering hatred of Catholicism and a resentment toward Christianity because it paid homage to a Jew. A German, Eduard von Hartmann declared that Jesus despised work, property, and the duties of family life. Many of these German scholars were also anti-Semites.

We know how the Nazis in Germany considered the Christian churches as shams and frauds, particularly because they were "Jewish and international."

Nevertheless, despite their hatred of Christianity, those 18th century theologians were scrupulously honest in their

scholarship. They did not, for example, despite their strong anti-Jesus bias, accept the Gospel versions of the culpability of the Jews in the crucifixion as a historical fact, dismissing these accounts as not so, and all agreed the crucifixion was a Roman affair.

By arranging the four Gospels into four parallel columns in chronological sequence - from Mark around 70 to Matthew in 85 to Luke in 90 and John maybe in 110 c.e.- to compare how the evangelists treated the same event in their respective Gospels, there is observed to be an escalation in hyperbole. As time went by, with each successive evangelist, the miracles became more miraculous, the vilification of the Jews more intensified, the guilt of the Jews obsessively expanded, the crucifixion enriched with more detail, and the resurrection attested to by an ever increasing number of angels and personal appearances by Jesus before his disciples.

The mythology these writers believed in so fervently is hardly believable in our day. But within that mythology they captured, explained, and distorted the Jesus of history.

The gospel writers had to slant their Gospels to meet local challenges of their day. Therefore, it did not matter if their stories did not match, as long as they solved their respective problems.

To try and learn more of the Jesus of history scholars have

(Jesus, contin'd)

set out on a journey into archaeology and history to test which Gospel assertions were embedded in mere faith and which contained solid facts. It is felt that the picture presented with the greatest number of factual events may best represent the historical Jesus.

Seeing Jesus as a historical being is making him more real and plausible than when approached simply through the eyes of Christian belief.

Theology has concerned itself almost exclusively, from the beginning, with the mystical Christ of faith, the Christ risen from the grave. Now the historians are giving us new eyes to see and understand Jesus.

The truth is that Jesus remains too disturbing a figure ever to be left to himself. Christianity in all its multifarious manifestations, Orthodox and heterodox, has been a repeated attempt to make sense of him, to make him say what they want.

Yet, almost in spite of the Christ of the theologians, Jesus has survived: a man doodling in the dust with his finger, while all around him self-righteous men are shouting for the death of a sinner; a man who could liken the love of God to a fussy Jewish mother searching a house high and low for a lost coin; a man with sudden outbursts of anger, and strange flashes of mysticism; an exorcist, and a spiritual healer, but also one who sits

to eat with sinners, and is accused of being a wine-bibber and a glutton. This is a very distinctive figure indeed, even though there are so many things about him which we should like to know and do not know. Until now, each aspect of Jesus has been seen through a kaleidoscope in which the total picture has been fragmented into theological and scholarly abstractions. We have knowledge and information today which can greatly assist us to see and understand the true Jesus of history.

Books which can help you in this search of Jesus Christ are:

"Jesus: Man and Master", by Mary C. Morrison. Nelson, Foster & Scott Ltd. 1968.

"Appointment in Jerusalem", A Search for the Historical Jesus, by Max I. Dimont. St. Martin's Press, New York. 1991.

"Jesus", by A.N. Wilson. Sinclair-Stevenson Press, London, England. 1992.

"Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism", by John Shelby Spong. HarperCollins Publishers. 1991.

"Christianity is founded on a prophet who was put to death as a blasphemer and a social menace.... The significance of the life of Jesus is often thought of as a legal significance, consisting in a life of perfect morality, or total conformity to a code of right action. But if you think of his significance as prophetic rather than legal, his real significance is that of being the one figure in history whom no organized human

society could possibly put up with".
-Northrop Frye, The Great Code.

JESUS AND THE INCLUSIVE KINGDOM

The historical Jesus was raised in Nazareth, only five or six kilometers from the urban Galilean capital of Sepphoris. He grew up along one of the busiest trade routes of ancient Palestine. He and his disciples were certainly influenced by the all-pervasive presence of the Roman city and of Hellenistic civilization.

The moral code of the people living at that time in the Mediterranean society was based on honour and shame. Honour was the value of a person in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. Honour and shame determined human action. To be shamed in the eyes of another was to lose one's being.

Furthermore, in those days, unlike today, society had no middle class. Society was based upon patronage, not class stratification. This resulted in spheres of influence in which client contacted patron, directly or indirectly, for privilege and position.

Patronage and clientage could be found in the social relationships between slave and master, in political organizations when positions of power were brokered by friends of influential office holders and even in religion when individual access to God was brokered by the religious establishment. In such a society, moral, economical, social and political existence was fragile and threatened.

Though Jesus and his disciples appear to have been from the wealthy business class of the time, it was to the poor that Jesus addressed himself. The Jewish faith of the day was quite exclusive and Jesus in turn acted completely inclusively. In this he differed from the rest in his religion (Judaism), the Essenes,

even his own parents and family. He asked his Jewish hearers to make a connection between their religious and ritual observances, and the deepest stirrings of conscience, when God speaks directly to the individual. The kingdom of God was not complete for Jesus unless it contained the whole of Israel: and that meant the untouchables, the impure, the outcasts and the sinners. It was to such as these that God held out his hands in yearning love.

And so it was Jesus ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners. He has no honour and he has no shame. He advocated an open, egalitarian meal table. His healing and common meal were a strategy for rebuilding community on radically different principles.

Based upon a view that all persons must have equal rights and sharing of spiritual healing and material power, Jesus taught that all individuals may be brought into direct contact with God and with one another without the need of the religious establishment. Jesus announced the immediate presence of the power of God, the kingdom of God without a broker.

In his parables and teaching Jesus described a here-and-now kingdom of nobodies and the destitute. This kingdom looks to the present, not to the future, and sees how people can live now within an already and always available divine dominion. It is a kingdom performed rather than proclaimed.

Jesus wished to rebuild the human community through love and appreciation of one another in a nonviolent programme of acceptance and understanding of each other and a recognition of the punishments and rewards of our own actions. He did not judge, but rather showed persons how their thinking and attitudes

determined their, and their
neighbour's destiny.

MYTHOLOGY

Myths are pictorial presentations of enduring and essential truth about the unseen forces with which humankind has to do, and of our relations with them. Usually they are stories that account for the origins of beings, things, situations, or events. Many myths are prehistorical in origin; others were created in subsequent historical periods. It is an art which is being found again, ie, the programme Star Trek.

Myths are metaphorical of spiritual potentiality in the human being, and the same powers that animate our life animate the life of the world.

Professor Joseph Campbell in his book, "The Power of Myth", stated science and mythology do not conflict. He said, "Science is breaking through now into the mystery dimensions. It's pushed itself into the sphere the myth is talking about. It's come to the edge, the interface between what can be known and what is never to be discovered because it is a mystery that transcends all human research. The source of life - what is it? No one knows. We don't even know what an atom is, whether it is a wave or a particle - it is both...

That's the reason we speak of the divine. There's a transcendent energy source. When the physicist observes subatomic particles, he's seeing a trace on a screen. These traces come and go, come and go, and we come and go, and all of life comes and goes. That energy is the informing energy of all things. Mythic worship is addressed to that.

WHAT BECOMES OF THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE if any part of it can be described to myth? The answer is found in reflection upon the distinction between conveyers of

truth and truth itself. In any age our means of expression are imperfect; we feel realities which

cannot with any mathematical rigidity be defined or described. So we need the poet and the artist, gifted with divine inspiration to suggest by symbolic words and forms the truths which no flat pose or scientific measurement can represent.

The imaginative stories, including the element of myth, which form parts of the Bible are the efforts of persons to put truth into pictures. These wondering thinkers were sure that humankind is not the first or greatest reality in existence. There was and is Something or Someone greater than them. The biblical writers took imaginative forms which had come down in tradition, used the metaphorical language of their day, and made their reflections of spiritual truths.

Therefore, biblical myths are not fantasy, or illusions of primitive mentality; they are a unique way of communicating what is created and perceived by the imagination. Myths are believed in faith; though they cannot be proved to be true by reason, they are accepted by reason as pointing to truth.

As suggested above, the day of the usefulness of mythology is not over. John Spong in his book, "Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism", states we need to demythologize the myths of the Bible in order that we might remythologize them in today's metaphors.

THE POWER OF FAITH

Our age has become so aware of the limitations of human nature that it has lost a proper perspective of the

power of faith. The words of Sir
Arthur Stanley Eddington of
Cambridge speak to our condition:

"I am standing on the threshold
about to enter a room. It is a

(Power of Faith, cont'd)

complicated business. In the first place I must shove against an atmosphere pressing with the force of fourteen pounds on every square inch of my body. I must make sure of landing on a plank travelling at twenty miles a second around the sun. I must do this while hanging from a round planet, head outward into space, and with a wind of ether blowing at no one knows how many miles a second through every interstice of my body. The plank has no solidity of substance. To step on it is like stepping on a swarm of flies. Shall I not slip through? Verily it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a scientific man to pass through a door. And whether this door be a barn door or a church door, it would be wiser that he should consent to be an ordinary man and walk in rather than wait until all the difficulties involved in a scientific ingress are resolved."

("The Nature of the Physical World".)

A MODERN HYMN

This hymn was written by Judith Fetter in 1985 and may be sung to the tune of St. Petersburg.

O God whose first creative word set universes into place,
 who stretched across the whirling void infinities of time and space;
 O speak to our chaotic day
 a word of ordered grace we pray.

O Christ who came the living word,
 proclaiming love's redeeming power,
 who drained the tempter's bitter cup
 and triumphed in earth's darkest hour;
 O speak to our despair and pain

O Spirit, everpresent word,
 God's agent of transforming grace,
 who seeks to enter every heart with
 light its darkness to replace;
 O speak within the hearts we raise
 a joyful word of faith and praise.

 THANK YOU for the responses you have given to the first issue of Religion NOW. With over a fifty percent acknowledgment, including compliments, questions and comments your editor is heartened.

May the continuing issues find not only your interest but also your response and debate.

QUOTES

"Prayer does not change God, but it changes him who prays". -Kierkegaard

"We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when adults are afraid of the light". - Plato

"Life must be understood backwards. But it must be lived forwards". -Kierkegaard

"Love is an act of faith, and whoever is of little faith is also of little love". - Erich Fromm

"Religion NOW" is published in limited edition by the Rev. Ross E. Readhead, B.A., B.D., Cert of Corrections, McMaster University, in the interest of furthering knowledge and participation in

religion.

Dialogue is invited and
welcomed.

Correspondence may be mailed
to (Edited
comments@religionnow.ca).