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A Postmodernist Before His Time — Thomas Jefferson on Jesus

The effort to separate the “Jesus of History” from the “Christ of Faith” is one of the hallmarks of theological liberalism — and a point of contact between liberal theology and postmodern secularism. Made famous by successive “quests” for a merely historical Jesus, this effort represents an attempt to recover Jesus as a figure in history, stripped of all claims to deity. Most Americans would be surprised to know that Thomas Jefferson was involved in his own quest for a merely human Jesus — and this project didn’t stop with Jefferson.

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The Jesus presented by those committed to this methodology is not the incarnate Son of God, deity in human flesh. To the contrary, he is a Judean folk philosopher, a radical religious reformer, or a teacher of enlightened morality.

The miracles, claims to deity, and supernatural dimensions are simply denied — relegated to those who believe in the “Christ of faith.” Out are the virgin birth, all miracles and healings, the resurrection, and the forgiveness of sins. What remains is a secularized and humanized Jesus — a religious teacher whose teachings may still retain value — not the Christ of historic biblical Christianity.

This effort began with the emergence of Enlightenment thought and the elevation of human reason above divine revelation. Early figures such as Hermann S. Reimarus and David Friedrich Strauss argued that the early church had constructed a supernatural Christ as a figure of faith and creed who bore little resemblance to the simple figure of Jesus. The four canonical Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, were dismissed as contaminated with this supernatural bias.

Later, figures such as Albert Schweitzer criticized the “questers” for their lack of concrete results and their denial of the eschatological focus of Jesus’ teachings. Rudolf Bultmann, one of the paragons of liberal theology in the twentieth century, argued that relatively little could actually be known about the real, historical Jesus. He argued that the Bible and the Christian message must therefore be “demythologized” in order to find meaning that would be relevant to the questions of modern human beings.

Shortly after Bultmann, a new series of “quests” for the historical Jesus emerged, beginning with Ernst Kasemann and continuing down to what has been recently known as the “Jesus Seminar.” This group of academics has once again attempted to “discover” an historical Jesus out of the gospels and other biblical materials. Using a system of colored beads, these self-appointed “experts” sought to determine which sayings of Jesus are authentic. The participants in the seminar voted with colored beads. A red bead indicated that the saying was probably authentic. Pink indicated that a saying was only possibly said by Jesus. Grey indicated serious doubt about a saying, and black was used to signal that a saying was almost surely not, in the participant’s opinion, an authentic statement of Jesus.

Unsurprisingly, there is very little red in the Jesus Seminar’s red-letter New Testament. As Albert Schweitzer noted over a century ago, those looking for a merely historical Jesus are like persons who are staring into a well, thinking that they have “discovered” an historical figure, but are in truth seeing only their own reflection.

Most Americans would probably be surprised to know that one of our founding fathers was involved in a similar quest — and for many of the same reasons. Thomas Jefferson, primary author of the Declaration of Independence and the nation's third president, twice experimented with editing the New Testament in order to “liberate” Jesus from the supernatural beliefs of the early Christians.

As a matter of fact, his second experiment, known popularly as “The Jefferson Bible,” was Jefferson's attempt to cut out all supernatural references in order to reveal the Jesus Jefferson preferred — a moral teacher, but not the Son of God.

In a letter to John Adams written in 1813, Jefferson described his effort: “In extracting the pure principles which he taught, we should have to strip off the artificial vestments in which they have been muffled by priests, who have travestied them into various forms, as instruments of riches and power to themselves. . . . We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, select, even from them, the very words only of Jesus, paring off the amphibologisms into which they have been led There will be found remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man.”

Jefferson also related just how he had gone about editing the Gospels: “I have performed this operation for my own use, by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book, and arranging the matter which is evidently his, and which is as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill.” In the end, Jefferson's first effort resulted in a forty-six page cut-and-paste edition of his own making.

Almost two decades later, Jefferson would produce his final effort in this line, completing *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* by 1820. In a letter to his friend William Short, Jefferson again stated full confidence in his ability to extract the “real” Jesus from the Gospels: “The difference is obvious to the eye and to the understanding, and we may read as we run to each his part; and I will venture to affirm that he who, as I have done, will undertake to winnow this grain from the chaff, will find it not to require a moment's consideration. The parts fall asunder of themselves, as would those of an image of metal and clay.”

Jefferson's confidence in his ability to extract a “real” Jesus from the Gospels is supreme evidence of hubris and arrogance. As historian Jaroslav Pelikan noted, Jefferson “was apparently quite sure that he could tell what was genuine and what was not in the transmitted text of the New Testament.” In the end, Jefferson excised the miracles, all claims to Christ's deity, and supernatural events such as Christ's virgin conception, resurrection, atonement, and ascension.

Why would he do this? Jefferson rejected the teachings of orthodox Christianity, but he considered the moral teachings of Jesus to be the most elevated ethic the world had ever seen. His exact religious convictions are difficult to determine, since Jefferson insisted that his personal beliefs were not of public significance. Nevertheless, it is probably safest to assume that the younger Jefferson was a fairly radical deist, while the older Jefferson moved toward Unitarianism. What Jefferson's writings do clearly reveal is what he did *not* believe — that Jesus was the Son of God.

Pelikan rightly explains that Jefferson saw the Apostle Paul as the great enemy, blaming Paul for transforming the simple Jesus into a supernatural redeemer. Jefferson's Jesus is to be admired and followed, not worshipped. As the late Daniel J. Boorstin, a former Librarian of Congress, remarked, “The Jeffersonian God . . . was not so much to be worshipped as to be imitated.” Jefferson believed that belief in some deity was required for the maintenance of morality, and he saw Jesus as the most insightful teacher of the morality Jefferson wanted to see maintained.

Erik Reece, author of the cover story in the current issue of *Harper's Magazine*, applauds Jefferson's effort. A lecturer in English at the University of Kentucky, Reece describes himself as a “lapsed son of a Southern Baptist preacher.” He suggests that, by removing all claims of deity and the Resurrection, “Jefferson portrayed an ordinary man with an extraordinary, though improbable, message.” Like Jefferson, Reece sees orthodox Christianity as a distortion of Jesus' teachings.

Unlike Jefferson, Reece can find a presentation of Jesus more to his liking in the Gnostic documents discovered since 1945 — especially the so-called *Gospel of Thomas*. As Reece argues: “Like Jefferson's gospel, Thomas's ignores the virgin birth. Thomas's Jesus never performs a miracle, never calls himself the Son of God, and never claims that he will have to die for the sins of humankind. Instead he tells parables, he issues instructions, and, most alarmingly, he locates the kingdom of God in that one place we might never look — right in front of us.” In sum, the Jesus presented by the *Gospel of Thomas* “is obviously no savior, certainly no messiah.” But the *Gospel of Thomas* is no authentic gospel. It was

rejected by the early church as false and incompatible with true Christianity.

In the *Gospel of Thomas* Reece “was shocked to find a version of Christianity that I could accept.” No savior, no redemption, no supernatural Christ. As Reece explains his approach: “My main focus is to look at the actual teaching of the reformer we call Jesus, and not be burdened with sin, sacrifice and salvation . . . I rather focus on his teachings in this world and relocate the kingdom of God, which raises ethical questions about how we can be good stewards in this life.”

The message Reece finds so acceptable is, as he describes the meaning of the *Gospel of Thomas*, “a realization on the part of each individual that he or she still possesses a divine light lodged within the heart, and that light can reveal the world to be a beautiful, undivided wholeness.”

Our postmodern age demands the deconstruction of every truth and the right of every individual to determine his or her own reality. Biblical Christianity is to be deconstructed even as each individual is liberated to construct whatever vision of Jesus the individual may find compatible with his or her own worldview and philosophy of life. Jefferson’s personal quest becomes a cultural mandate — edit your own gospel. Or, if you would rather, simply adopt one of the false gospels rejected by the Church and consider it your own Bible.

Erik Reece’s article is a reminder that Thomas Jefferson’s project is not over. It is now undertaken by those who would redefine Christianity in terms of a postmodern vision of an elevated and enlightened humanity. In one sense, Jefferson’s private project has gone mainstream — perfectly fitted for the spirit of this age.

True Christianity stands or falls on the historical veracity of the Gospels and the truthfulness of the entire biblical text. Without the foundation of biblical Christianity, we are left without any definitive understanding of who Jesus is or why He came to earth in human flesh. We would have no understanding of why Christ died or how our sins can be forgiven. Without the Resurrection we are, as Paul reminds, of all people most to be pitied.

We can accept no distinction between the “Jesus of History” and the “Christ of Faith.” They are one and the same — and Jesus is indeed, as Peter testified, “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Those who claim to “discover” a Jesus who is not the Christ may claim to do so in an attempt to rescue Jesus’ moral teachings from any claims of divinity, but in the end they do not find the real Jesus of history. Instead, they see only their own faces at the bottom of the well.

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