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“Does Anybody Know My Jesus?”
Between Dogma and Romanticism

Christ is the Question
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and their Impact on Culture

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Does Anybody Know My Jesus? Between Dogma and Romanticism

When I entered graduate school forty-odd years ago, the “New Quest of the Historical Jesus” was in full cry. Having now ended my formal teaching career, I find the *New New Quest* is churning out books, press releases, and television interviews at a rate ordinarily equaled only by titillating national scandals. I hope you will pardon me for saying, it’s *deja vu* all over again.

There is in fact almost nothing new about the new new quest, as there was little new about the old new quest. Each of them differs from the old old quest of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries only in one significant respect: we have changed our notions of the ideal Jesus whom we would *like* to find in the sources, and the self-anointed experts obligingly (and profitably) dish up precisely the Jesus who is wanted at the moment. They expertly sift out those disconcerting bits of the tradition that offend (eschatology, final judgment, excessive Jewishness, or whatever), proving by the very latest nineteenth-century techniques that the *real* Jesus could not possibly have said any of those offending things. And they find irrefutable clues in previously unknown documents that Jesus was really just the sort of person we would want writing opinion pieces in our newspapers. The willfulness of the method is surpassed only by the banality of the results.

This is no longer merely a scholar’s game, a way of adding some extra income and gaining our fifteen minutes of celebrity. Popular culture has embraced the many Jesuses available for the taking or making, from the sado-masochist Jesus of Mel Gibson to Mary Magdalene’s secret lover in the fevered and careless imagination of Dan Brown. Here is the zenith (or the apogee) of the trajectory which began when David Friedrich Strauß constructed “the life of Jesus for the German people,” designed for the cheap print culture of the nineteenth century. If it sells 100,000 copies or grosses a billion and a half at the box office, it must be true.

It’s worth asking, Why? What’s all the fuss about? Why is the *historical* Jesus, as distinct from just “Jesus,” such a big item? As you might suspect, that question has its own history.

“The Flight from Authority”

The history of the historical Jesus is part of what Jeff Stout has called “The flight from authority.” He depicts the progressive failure of one after the other of those foundations upon which we in the western world have sought to secure knowledge and trustworthy values since the dawn of the modern age. It is the history of suspicion and disillusionment, but also of constantly renewed hope for freedom in believing and hope in a just social order. It is the story of uncovering the clay feet of public authority, but at the same time the story of a quest for a satisfying *private* authority—for each of us moderns is torn between our mistrust for the publicly and institutionally certified modes of authority and our longing to be *secure* in our deepest beliefs and hopes.

Note: this is a distinctly *modernist* story, and it is one in which we are all characters, whether we think of ourselves as “liberals” or “conservatives.” The history of modernism can be written as the tale of *justified suspicions*.

Reformation. The Reformers suspected the guys in Rome. They wanted to be free from institutional control “from across the mountains,” and from a penitential system that braced up faith with fear and, incidentally, took a lot of good German Geld back to the coffers of St. Peter’s. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and the rest were by no means individualists in the modern mode, about which we’ll talk in a minute, but in their emphasis on the personal dimension of sin, on the liberation of conscience, and on the direct clarity of scripture, they helped to pave the way for that individualism. With their motto *sola scriptura* they dared suggest that every man and woman could read the Bible for himself or herself, and their more complicated doctrine of scripture’s transparency, its *perspicuitas*, implied that the individual reader could make her own way to the meaning, without help from the clergy, for “popes and councils do err.” (They didn’t really mean that, else they wouldn’t have written so many commentaries, but that’s another story.) The point made was this: I can figure out for myself what it all means, so long as no one actively hides the truth from me. And of course, there was usually reason to suspect that people *were* hiding the

truth.

Enlightenment. The genie of suspicion, once out of the bottle, is uncontrollable. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries groups of intellectuals in London, Edinburgh, Paris, and elsewhere began to suspect not only ecclesiastical hierarchies and structures, but dogmas and traditions of all kinds. Why were we given minds, if not to think things out for ourselves? The great task, the educational task of humankind, was to free the mind, so that the sheer power of reason, once unfettered from external authority, could discover what is indubitably true. When Descartes in his warm stove has doubted all that can reasonably be doubted, there remains that clear and immanent foundation upon which all other knowledge can rest.

Modern Science. The third great movement of liberation, most vivid to us because its aftermath has so transformed the world in our own lifetimes, is the rise of modern science. From the enlightenment, the pioneers of physics learned to suspect *mystery* and *superstition*. From the deductive science that still prevailed in the Enlightenment, they sought to free the powers of observation and reason, by systematically organizing the process of gathering data, formulating hypotheses, and testing by controlled experiment. Method became the means to truth. Thus by *demystifying* the world and so liberating ourselves from *superstition*, now understood as *unwarranted belief*, we could discover the way the real world works.

A Story of Liberation

I have sketched the story of successive suspicions with perhaps too much academic cynicism. We need to remember that it was always also a story of liberation. It is a story we moderns have lived by, in many variations—a story of *progress* and of progressive *freedom*. At its noblest, the story has been a call to arms against our oppressors—even the oppressive superego that resides within ourselves (or did, in any case, in early twentieth-century Vienna). It is a call to set free the individual *conscience* and the individual's *inquiring mind* from the

oppressive authority of institutions, dogmas, and inherited prejudices—to see the world as it is, fresh and clean and pregnant with opportunities for human flourishing.

We are all cynics now. So much of that story’s promise rings hollow that we are tempted to reject the whole narrative as a delusion. But what then? Do we retreat into new authoritarianisms of our own devising? Or do we follow our postmodern hyperawareness into an all-embracing skepticism, into a jaded world in which there is no truth, no transcendence, no lasting thing that is good?

Before we succumb to the opportunism of the right or the cynicism of the left, let us pause to remember the promise. Let us remember that the liberation was sometimes real and, when real, always precious. I grew up in the fundamentalist, racist, small-town South, and I rejoice to say that I lived some of that story of liberation. I am profoundly grateful for what Reformation, Enlightenment, and Science have done for me, and I’m not about to throw that away.

The Negatives

Nevertheless it is true that the story of liberation leaves out some important things. And the modernist struggles—both on the part of the proponents of modernism and of its reactionary opponents—have led into blind alleys in theology and biblical interpretation. Those blind alleys constrict and distort the perennial “quest of the historical Jesus.” There are four aspects of modern theology and biblical interpretation that seem to me at fault here:

1. The modernist/fundamentalist controversies a century ago have left us with a habit of privileging *literalism* on both sides of a polarized debate. The mistake came, as Hans Frei has so carefully explained, in supposing that, if we say that the Bible is true, we must mean that it *refers* accurately to facts of nature or to historical events. Other ways in which a narrative might *mean* and might convey truth were systematically “eclipsed.” Note that both sides of the controversies were caught in this same trap. On the one side were the historical critics, who triumphantly demonstrated that it wasn’t likely that Jesus *really* said this or that, or that several of the stories about him seemed to presuppose a situation like that of the early church rather than the context of

Jesus' own time in Roman Galilee and Judaea, and so on. On the other side were the true believers, using the same positivistic methods of archaeology and historiography to show, yes, everything did happen just as the Bible says. So in the modernist era, what had been called "the plain sense of the text" or "the literal meaning" came to signify something quite different from what those phrases had meant in the premodern eras. This is a question to which we shall have to return later in this series.

2. The second distortion of our way of questioning has been an unconscious acceptance of what George Lindbeck has called a *cognitivist* model of religion. We have been seduced by a long history of theological debates to think that it is *beliefs* and *doctrines* that define faith—both for believers and for antibelievers. That's only natural, considering that the debates have been carried on by people who earn their living as professional theologians in theological seminaries and faculties. But it is only another sign that theology is too important to be left to theologians. Theology is the grammar of the faithful life, in one helpful formulation, but language is more than grammar and life more than both.

3. The third distortion is the pervasive individualism of the modern western world. In the religious realm this individualism is expressed in the nostrum which we hear every day, repeated as if it were as self-evident as sunrise, "religion is a private matter." In fact, religion, for good or ill, has always been anything but a private matter, and we do not begin to understand religious phenomena if we ignore their social and communal dimensions.

4. The fourth distortion of modern religion is romanticism. Though theologians operate with a cognitivist model, as if concepts were life, for most of us feeling ultimately trumps rationality. And when we talk about who we really are, it is self-consciousness and self-awareness that is central to the way we think about our identity.

Literalism, cognitivism, privatism, romanticism all affect our sense of who we are—of what it means to be a particular person. And they all necessarily affect the way we think about the identity of Jesus, for every age uses its own taken-for-granted models of identity when it tries to describe the person of Jesus. Those good old hymns we loved to sing at summer camp are very

revealing. “What a Friend We Have in Jesus!” “Jesus, Lover of My Soul!” “Jesus, the very thought of Thee/ With sweetness fills the breast;/ But sweeter far Thy face to see,/ And in thy presence rest.” “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” And of course, that tryst in the garden, all alone, when the dew is still on the roses:

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
 And He tells me I am His own;
 And the joy we share as we tarry there,
 None other has ever known.

Now it would be unfair to suggest that this kind of romanticism, even eroticism, is only a modern phenomenon—I slipped in one verse by Bernard of Clairvaux, after all. But the ubiquity of the first person singular in these verses, the sentimentality, the absence of any concern for the world beyond the two lovers—all these are the signs of modern romantic religion, the kind of Christianity that insists that the only question that counts is, “Do you take Jesus as your *personal savior*?”

Even Albert Schweitzer, after brilliantly cataloguing the excesses and failures of the “Life of Jesus Movement,” turns back at the end of the book to a lonely romanticism: Jesus, freed from the shackles of ecclesiastical doctrine, “comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me!’” Schweitzer writes his own romantic biography of Jesus, and then he goes off to meet the mysterious stranger in the jungles of Lambarene.

But historically there have been quite other ways of thinking about who Jesus is. Put alongside those romantic hymns around the campfire this, the very earliest hymn we know from the followers of Jesus:

Hymn the anointed Jesus,
 who had the very shape of God
 but did not count it windfall
 to be God’s equal,

but emptied himself,
taking shape of slave:
becoming of human likeness
and found in human guise,
he humbled himself—
obedient to point of death:
yes, of the cross's death.

Therefore God has raised him high,
conferred on him the name
that's higher than every name,
so at the name of Jesus
every knee must bend:
heavenly and earthly and infernal all,
and every tongue must loudly own
the Lord is Jesus Christ,
to the glory of Father God.

That doesn't sound very much like your typical "Mediterranean peasant" nor your average "marginal Jew." Leaving aside for the moment the question of the accuracy of those modern portraits, the Jesus they depict was not the one that made history. It was not the Mediterranean peasant nor the marginalized folk hero nor the supposed Galilean Cynic who produced the vast swerve in cultural history that we know as Christianity. It was the mysterious god-equal figure of the hymn, whose crucifixion was not merely one more slaughter in the routine of colonial brutality, was more than mere martyrdom, was beyond the pathos of crushed innocence—of all of which his time, like ours, had seen far too many examples. In the poetry of the early Christians, that shameful death became the pivot of the human story, the supreme model of grace, God's ultimate self-revelation. It is, of course, difficult for academic historians to believe that poetry can

make history—but that, I submit, is what happened.

But what is the process that yielded that poetry? That is, I think, one of the most interesting of the questions that have teased modern biblical scholarship. How did that Galilean carpenter become the god-equal envoy of God, the last Adam, the new *anthropos*, the partner in creation, the savior of the world, the Son of God, the Lord of heaven and earth and hell? It is not for want of trying by generations of learned and ingenious scholars that our understanding of the process remains unsatisfying. Neither is the problem entirely the result of scarce and fragmentary evidence. Rather, the whole modernist project suffers from two serious flaws, which have skewed our perception of the questions we need to be asking about Christianity's origins. One is the habit of treating broad cultural abstractions as if they were real *things* that could cause other things to happen. The other is a romantic conception of personal identity. It's the latter I want to talk about today.

Another Model of Identity

One fatal flaw in the modernist project of Jesus research is the romantic model of personal identity which has controlled our post-Enlightenment construction of the self. Each of us imagines that the real *I* is a unique, mysterious entity, utterly individual and never fully knowable by anyone else. The self is identified with my consciousness of self, which may of course be deceived, but which is mine, mine alone. The introspective, radically individual conception of personal identity receives its apotheosis in Freud's topography of the self. The mysterious consciousness, buried deep within each person by the process of socialization, stands over against an antagonistic social world that has, beginning with its birth, distorted, restricted, and obscured it. The public persona, the identity that others see, hides and may obliterate, even from our own awareness, the real "I."

In an intellectual world dominated by the introspective conception of the self, it is easy to see why the "quest of the historical Jesus" has so often taken the form of a search to discover Jesus' "self-consciousness." That was the watchword in British and American scholarship of the first half of the twentieth century: "Jesus' messianic self-consciousness." The ultimate question

was, “Who did Jesus understand himself to be?” Conservative as well as liberal scholars labored to show that Jesus *did* think of himself as the Messiah and of God as his father, and that therefore there was an unbroken continuity between that self-awareness and what the early Church said about him. Many continental scholars, on the other hand, tended to be more skeptical, positing a sharp divide between the “Jesus of history” and “the church’s Christ”; between Jesus’ own sense of self and mission and the creative constructions of the early communities that were shaped by their belief in Jesus’ resurrection. Oftentimes the question is put in rather simplistic terms: Did Jesus think he was the Messiah, or not? As if “the Messiah” had been a fixed and well-known concept that Jesus could just slip into, like a suit of clothes. That misleading simplification is one of many that have been demolished by discoveries of recent decades, to which I’ll return a bit later. But even more sophisticated ways of putting the question have, all too often, assumed without question the romantic, individualistic construction of personal identity.

There is, however, quite a different way of thinking about personal identity, which is prevalent in the social sciences and in some forms of present-day literary theory. It begins by asking the simple question, “How did I come to know who I am?—How did I become a conscious self?” And instead of imagining some transcendent substance in me, this way of inquiry remembers how a baby begins to respond to the mother’s smiles, how baby-talk is met by answering parent-talk, how touch and warmth transmit affection and caring and limits, how, as language skills grow, the world of the “significant others” expands and my story begins to interact with the stories of all who speak to me and, potentially, of all who have written and spoken in my language community.

Since I am an academic, I should mention one Big Name among the many who have come to see self-identity in this way. Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian literary critic, constructs a dialogic model of the self. One becomes a person not in opposition to society, but precisely through society—and through language, the primary instance of sociality. “Any instance of self-awareness . . . is an act of gauging oneself against some social norm. . . . In becoming aware of myself, I attempt to look at myself, as it were, through the eyes of another person.” Bakhtin was following

the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who rejected Freud's opposition between self and society. In Freud, the more of the other, the less of the self; in Bakhtin, the more of the other, the more of the self. Coincidentally, this dialogic model of the self sounds very much like the earlier American psychologist, George Herbert Mead, who emphasized the role of the "significant other" in the making of the self. Selfhood is a process. It grows through an endless series of transactions with other persons, within a specific social and cultural complex. It flourishes through language, which makes the dialogue possible. This social-transactionist conception of the self has in fact become quite widely shared by psychologists in the field of social cognition.

Would it not make sense to use the dialectical, social model of the self in our inquiries into the identity of history-forming personages of the past? In the case of Jesus, this would mean that we would no longer drive a wedge between the "real" inner Jesus, known only to himself and (it is claimed) a few modern scholars, and the images of Jesus formed by his followers. The complicating factor, of course, is that the notion of the "significant other" would now have to be extended beyond the formative years of the subject—indeed, beyond the (earthly) lifetime of the subject, for the social transactions that produced the Jesus we are able to know happened for the most part after his death. Nevertheless, it seems to me that such a move offers a more realistic picture of the Jesus of history, that is, the Jesus who has made history. What we have to describe is not some hidden, inner core of what Jesus knew himself to be, with all socially constructed layers of the self peeled away, but precisely the dialogical process by which those early followers of Jesus constructed their own identity at the very same time they were constructing Jesus' identity. It may sound overly bold to say that Jesus *is* the persona he becomes in interaction with others. I defer to systematic theologians to say what the Trinitarian implications might be, though I think to propose a christology in terms of such a process may not be quite so heretical as it sounds.

Implications

We should have learned by now that there are no final answers in the writing of history. Every age has its own blind spots, its own unconscious preconceptions, its prejudices; every age also has its fresh discoveries, its new ways of asking questions, and new voices in the debate about what happened in the past. All this is abundantly illustrated by the history of the quest for the so-called “historical” Jesus. In these lectures I am not proposing the *ultimate* way of understanding who Jesus was. I am not going to reveal the secret Jesus, long concealed by this or that conspiratorial agency or the loss of *the* magic manuscript. (Although I might reconsider, if someone offers me a large enough advance on the movie rights.) I am proposing that, when we ask after Jesus’ *persona*, we allow ourselves to ask the kinds of questions we would ask about ourselves, or about other persons in the present or in the past, that is, to adopt a social, transactional model of the self. This will not yield the *ultimate* picture of Jesus, the *real* Jesus. But it may help us to escape that romantic, introspective, individualistic, privatist model of identity that has shaped too much of the modernist Quest.

The model of selfhood I am suggesting takes identity to be a process, not a substance. A process, lifelong, not a once-for-all, unchanging thing that is oneself. To say that Jesus, like the rest of us, *becomes* who he is may sound shocking—but that is the original scandal of the incarnation as it was heard by the sophisticated Middle Platonists of antiquity: that God should involve Godself in becoming. And my proposal is the modern counterpart to the ancient learned doctrine that responded to the scandal, the Enhypostatic Union. It is another way of saying that Jesus becomes a human person as we all do: by interaction with the others around him. All those questions asked by other characters in the Gospel stories—“Who is this, that even the winds and waves obey him?” “Is this not Joseph’s son?” “Where did this man get all this? ...Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” “Who *is* this ‘Son of the Human’?” “Are you the King of the Jews?” “Are you the One Who is Coming, or must we expect another?”—those questions are not clues in a game of Twenty Questions. The answer is not there all along to be guessed; the answer is in the making, and the Evangelists have each written their different stories in such a way that *we* the

readers must involve ourselves in the process. The identity of Jesus, like all human identity, is a *process*, not a given. The identity of Jesus, like all human identity, is *social*, not only introspective and private.

We only become human persons through language: that is the primary and definitive medium of our transactions with the significant others with and through whom we become who we are. In the words of Hannah Arendt, “from the time of our birth we are immersed in ‘a web of narratives,’ of which we are both the author and the object.” We become who we are through the stories others tell of us and the stories we tell of ourselves.

That insight provides us with one further clue for our asking who Jesus is: The process of identity-formation is an *interpretive* process. In every culture there are some master narratives that describe the way life is, and there are some typical characters in those narratives. Every individual has to find her or his story within that master narrative, and all the significant others around that person are also engaged in telling and retelling those stories and thus in the continual process of interpretation. In the second lecture in this series, next Wednesday, we are going to look at some of the ways in which people in the environment of Jesus interpreted life in their place and time. Then we will look at some of the examples of the ways the earliest followers of Jesus engaged with him in the very complicated process of interpretation. In this case it was a process that not only made places for him within several of the master narratives of that culture, but which in the long run changed those narratives for ever and in that way made history.