

IN THE NAME OF JESUS: CONTESTED CLAIMS TO THE LEGACY OF JESUS

Gregory C. Jenks

Executive Trustee, FaithFutures Foundation
www.faithfutures.org

The past 25 years have seen a very public contest for control of the Jesus label in the religion marketplace. While the churches no longer have a monopoly on Jesus in Western society, the Christian credentials of anyone promoting alternative interpretations of Jesus are publicly questioned. Is Jesus condemned to function merely as a cipher for our best (and worst) fantasies, or does the multi-faceted Jesus tradition still have the potential to challenge and transform individuals and communities?

The New Niagara: Celebrating Human Diversity & the Search for Meaning

**SnowStar Institute of Religion Conference
Niagara Falls, Canada
12–15 March 2002**

© 2002 Gregory C. Jenks

IN THE NAME OF JESUS: CONTESTED CLAIMS TO THE LEGACY OF JESUS

Gregory C. Jenks

Executive Trustee, FaithFutures Foundation

In this address I propose to explore some of the ways in which historical Jesus studies impact on the Christian faith. The scope, however, will be wider than Christianity, as it seems to me that there are many more interested parties to the Jesus question than the churches typically recognise. Both within the churches and beyond them, there are contested claims for the right to draw on the legacy of Jesus in the human search for meaning.

I begin with two examples of the diverse responses to historical Jesus studies: one an invitation, the other a challenge.

First, the invitation. In a paper published last year,¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson explores several ways in which recent historical Jesus research offers new possibilities to re-imagine Jesus and to refresh the memory of Jesus that lies at the heart of Christian faith. Towards the end of that essay, Elizabeth Johnson comments as follows:

[The earliest Christians] followed Jesus not by slavish imitation but by creative application of his values, imprinting his presence in new situations as best they could. Ever since, through a terribly messy history, the core dynamic has been the same. *In the community of the church, the future of what Jesus started is being lived out. ... Down through the centuries we keep the “dangerous” memory of Jesus alive.*²

The invitation, as I see it, is found in the words “in the community of the church, the future of what Jesus started is being lived out.” I hope they are true, but I would not wish to limit the living out of what Jesus started to those communities and movements that might be identified as part of the Church. Indeed, one of the issues that I will be concerned with in this address is the claim upon the legacy of Jesus by individuals and groups that are not “Church.”

So with that caveat, I find in Elizabeth Johnson’s statement an invitation to look for both continuity and change in the relationship between Jesus and the later Christian religion. There is something attractively open-ended about a future still being lived out. Rather than defining Christianity as faithfulness to the past, the emphasis moves to a dynamic faithfulness in the future.

¹ “The Word was Made Flesh and Dwelt Among Us. Jesus Research and Christian Faith.” in Doris Donnelly (ed), *Jesus. A Colloquium in the Holy Land*. (New York: Continuum, 2001) 146-166.

² Page 161 (my italics).

Next, the challenge. Recently I faced the following question after a lecture at a conference. I have heard it in various forms over the years, and you will doubtless have come across it as well.

Following a lecture on recent trends in historical Jesus studies and their implications for the future of Christianity, a young woman asked: “If you believe the kinds of things about Jesus and the Church that you seem to do, why do you continue to be a priest in the Church?”

That question is not only posed by conservatives seeking to exclude progressive thinkers from the life of the churches. It is a question we ask one another, and it is one we often face directly in our private reflections as well. How can we continue to be a part of an institution that seems to have betrayed so much of what Jesus was about, and which seems so averse to reform?

My answer to that question, I suspect, did not satisfy her. I will not rehearse it at this point, but I am sure it will emerge as I proceed through this address.

So the scene is set. On the table before us is the work of critical historical Jesus research over the past 250 years. On one side there is *the invitation* to discover new ways of being faithful to this kind of Jesus in the communities of faith that we fashion and sustain in the future. On the other side there is *the insistent demand* that we explain and justify our claims to be Christian if we deviate from—or even jettison³—so much that has traditionally been accepted as Christian faith and practice.

A “dangerous” memory

You may have noted that Elizabeth Johnson described the memory of Jesus that is kept alive in the Church as a “‘dangerous’ memory.” Indeed it is a dangerous and subversive memory, and especially so when it is set free from its ecclesial handlers and allowed to roam free in our imaginations.

Critical investigation of the life of Jesus has been a significant thread within New Testament scholarship for more than 200 years, but it was in the final quarter of the last century that we saw an **explosion of historical Jesus studies**.

³ John Shelby Spong addresses this issue directly at several points in *A New Christianity for a New World: Why traditional faith is dying and a new faith is being born* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

Interest in the renewed quest for the historical Jesus has been immense. It has spread well beyond the academic world with its conferences and scholarly studies, and has captured the imagination of the wider public.

There has been an avalanche of “Jesus books.” Major news magazines have run cover stories on various aspects of the historical Jesus debates or, as some now describe them, the holy wars over Jesus. This scholarship has touched a nerve in our modern consciousness as Jesus remains a major cultural icon even for those with little religious interest in him.

Of course, there has also been a **rearguard action**. Some scholars concerned to defend the traditional doctrines and practices of the churches have—quite amazingly—argued that critical study of Jesus is at best impossible, in any event unnecessary, and most likely an expression of bad faith. This is a most remarkable development in a tradition that has always prided itself on the historical character of the Christian religion in contrast to the mythic character of other faiths.

Luke Timothy Johnson has been a particular exponent of this line.⁴ Leaving aside his self-serving suggestion that historical Jesus research is the work of inferior scholars with bad motives, we should note that he represents the classic counter position to this paper. For Johnson, what matters is the faith taught by the Church. “The Church”—whether that means the Roman Catholic Church or some rival faction is never clarified—has exclusive distribution rights to the Jesus label in the religion market place. We will come back to that claim a little later.

Contrary to Luke Timothy Johnson—and more in keeping with Elizabeth A. Johnson—Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer asserts in *Jesus Against Christianity: Reclaiming the Missing Jesus*:

Jesus was and is dangerous. That is why he was killed in first-century Palestine and that is why he is unwelcome in many of our churches today.⁵

One of the catalysts for the resurgence in historical Jesus studies—and especially for their impact on the wider public—has been the **Jesus Seminar**. The Seminar was called together in 1985 by Robert W. Funk, with the task of working together to develop an agreed database of historical Jesus materials. They imagined the task would take no more than two or three meetings.

That project, which was to last more than fifteen years, drew together a significant number of biblical scholars with an interest in the historical Jesus studies. More than 200 scholars

⁴ See especially *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) and *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999).

⁵ Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Jesus Against Christianity: Reclaiming the Missing Jesus*. (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001) p. xv, n. 1.

participated in the project during that period, with some of the original group of 35 still actively involved almost twenty years later.

Keeping a diverse community of biblical scholars engaged in a collaborative research project over so many years is the least of Funk's achievements, although it verges on the miraculous. More importantly, the Seminar agreed early in its life to conduct its work in public and to make its findings accessible to the general community. In particular, they agreed always to come to a decision on the questions before them. Towards that end, they agreed to vote at the end of each session so that there was a definite indicator of what their consensus (or otherwise) might have been.

To the chagrin of the elitist theologians, who wish people simply to accept on faith what they are told about Jesus by the Church, the work of the Jesus Seminar resonated with the public in North America and beyond.

In addition to the collective reports of the Seminar in volumes like the bestseller *The Five Gospels*,⁶ various members of the Seminar have emerged as leading figures in the field. Apart from Funk himself, these include Marcus Borg (Oregon State), John Dominic Crossan (DePaul), Harold Attridge (Yale), Bruce Chilton (Columbia), Charles Hedrick (SW Missouri), Julian Hills (Marquette), Karen King (Harvard), John Kloppenborg (Toronto), Burton Mack (Claremont), Marvin Meyer (Claremont), Stephen Patterson (Eden), Brandon Scott (Phillips) and Walter Wink (Auburn).

Luke Timothy Johnson may not find their credentials impressive, but I am happy to acknowledge them—and a much longer list of colleagues whose names could not be recited here.

While the Jesus Seminar neither created the renewed quest nor resolved its core issues, it did set the agenda for historical Jesus studies over the past twenty years. And it drove the debate out of the academy and into the living rooms and the churches of North America.

So what are the **contours of this dangerous memory** that so excites the passions of progressives and reactionaries? They are to be found in the responses historical scholars make to three deceptively simple questions:

- ✓ What did Jesus think he was doing?
- ✓ Why was he killed?
- ✓ How do we explain the emergence of the Christian church(es) after Easter?

⁶ Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover & the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

Those are simple enough questions, but answering them in the light of what we now know about Jesus and his times produces some dangerous memories indeed!⁷

When seeking to grasp what Jesus thought he was doing it is essential to understand Jesus as a **first-century Jew**. We are dealing with a man of the Spirit who was profoundly shaped and sustained by the Jewish religious tradition of the Second Temple period, and who lived out his own response to the Sacred within the ancient Jewish social world.

Contrary to much Christian propaganda over the centuries, Jesus was not anti-Jewish, nor would he have found the religion of his society to be barren and unsatisfying. Judaism nurtured Jesus. It fed his sense of the Sacred. It shaped his vision of what life could be within the imperial rule of God, the divine commonwealth: *basileia*, the society where God rules, OK!

In keeping with the best of his Jewish religious tradition, Jesus' vision of the divine *basileia* involved him in a radical critique of many key dynamics of his own society. As a **social critic and reformer**, Jesus expressed his insights into the intimate presence of God in the subversive wisdom of his parables and aphorisms; in the experience of healing and wholeness that seems to have been a hallmark of his company; in a celebration of extravagant forgiveness; in welcoming the full participation of those usually left out of polite society in his time; and in meals where everyone was indeed welcome and there were no reserved seats.

He celebrated the presence of the holy in the unclean messiness of everyday life: declaring sins forgiven, pronouncing people well, gathering them at tables to eat and drink in celebration.

Intentionally or otherwise, this profoundly spiritual first-century Jew—with no patience for those institutions and persons who claimed to stand between God and the people—generated an **alternative society** with no privileged leaders and no distinguished heroes. The citizens of this divine empire were a most ordinary lot! My Jesus Seminar colleague, Mahlon Smith, has described the divine commonwealth as a “kingless kingdom,” a “beggars’ opera” and an “unsupervised kindergarten” in which there are no carers on duty! Mahlon notes with fine irony:

Jesus, for his part, did not volunteer to act as supervisor of such urchins. Instead of posing as a teacher, Jesus thanked his Abba for revealing to infants, i.e., children who are not ready for any instruction, what sages *per se* cannot see.⁸

⁷ See John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001) for a discussion that combines historical and textual studies.

⁸ Mahlon H. Smith, “DOING and UNDOING the WORD: Jesus & the Dialectics of Christology.” *Westar Institute Seminar Papers*, Fall 2000.

This is an aspect of the historical Jesus that traditional Christians find so hard to accept. Jesus was not feigning humility when he denied messianic pretensions or divine status. He did not see himself as a hero, and was not secretly reciting the Nicene Creed under his breath. According to the way Jesus looked at life, no one was to be called “Lord” or “Father.” The essence of *basileia* was *diakonia*—simple service without status or reward. It was then and it is now.

Such views are always disturbing, subversive and dangerous memories. They are now, and they were then. And they seem directly linked to his death.

Jesus was **killed because his personal spiritual vision**, with its critique of contemporary privilege and abuse, **had begun to capture the imagination of the crowd**. What would happen to the leaders if ordinary people actually started to think of themselves in the way that Jesus suggested?

What if the *basileia tou theou* was to be found in the shared life of the common people rather than in the comfortable privilege of the powerful? Even if it was an illusion, what if people started to act as if it were true?

Jesus accepted martyrdom as the price of faithfulness. He had no pretensions that his death would be an event with cosmic significance. He simply sensed that this fate was to be accepted as his destiny. To do anything else would have been to deny his own vision of the divine *basileia*. He would die unjustly, as millions have done before and since. And he did.

History reveals that the murder of Jesus was **insufficient to quench the insights** that his life had opened for people. The *basileia* community that had begun to experience living with just the daily bread that the Abba provided them found that this was still the case. The sick continued to be healed. The subversive wisdom of God’s holiness present in and among the everyday continued to be shared. Sinners continued to be forgiven. When they gathered at table they still sensed his presence with them.

His death did not mark the end of the dream. Instead, his significance—as the one whose faithfulness even to death had revealed the reality of the *basileia* as their shared experience—came to be celebrated in a diversity of early “Christologies” that were in contest with one another during the next 300 years.

Thinking of Jesus first of all as a first-century Jewish saint—rather than as the Second Person of the Trinity—is both dangerous and subversive. *Saint* is a loaded word, but I use it intentionally to get us to think of Jesus alongside of and among the diverse company of truly spiritual women and men who are bearers of the Spirit, windows of the Sacred.

As a human being, Jesus was one of us. As a saint, he was one of our best. Jesus is not without parallel or peer, but part of a wider and richer human legacy as a Spirit-person. And as a Christian I want to assert that Jesus' divinity is to be located in his humanity, not understood as something that displaces or supplements his humanity.

Contested claims to the legacy of Jesus

In broad terms, such are the contours of this dangerous and disturbing memory of Jesus that persists within the churches and beyond their boundaries.

One of the factors that has made such a recovery of the missing Jesus possible has been the loss of ecclesial control of religion scholars. The assertion of **academic freedom** from religious control is one of the achievements of the Enlightenment that we take for granted these days.

In the pioneering days of modern biblical scholarship, the pursuit of such questions could result in severe consequences for the scholar concerned. It is significant that the seminal work of Hermann Samuel Reimarus was only released for publication after his death, and even then under a pseudonym.⁹ David Fredrick Strauss found that his brilliant academic career was stopped short in his late-twenties after the publication of his critical study of the life of Jesus.¹⁰

While there are occasional modern instances of scholars coming under censure from religious authorities,¹¹ the historical trend has been towards decreasing religious control over critical religion scholarship. This has given scholars the freedom to pursue issues without fear or favor, and the results speak for themselves.

Critical Jesus research is looking for a plausible Jewish figure from first-century Palestine.

Dogmatic and confessional interests typically do not play a controlling part in historical Jesus

⁹ See the classic discussion of Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768) by Albert Schweitzer in *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. (1906. Complete Edition. London: SCM, 2000), chapter 2.

¹⁰ Like Reimarus, David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74) also receives a chapter length discussion by Albert Schweitzer (*The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, chapter 7).

¹¹ At least some of the original participants in the Jesus Seminar asked for their names to be suppressed for fear of reprisals by their own denominational authorities. A more recent and public example of religious censure of critical scholars is to be seen in the treatment of Gerd Lüdemann at Göttingen by the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church in Germany.

scholarship, even if they cannot be left aside by either the scholars or the wider public reading their results. We all have our hopes and fears about this Jesus figure, and would like to see the scholars confirming what we are already inclined to think.

With the loss of ecclesial control of the academy, and with the massive expansion of higher education in western societies over the past fifty years, the genie is out of the bottle. Critical religion scholarship is no longer a parlour game for the elite churchmen; something to be kept from the masses as a professional secret of the clergy.

The word has got out. Jesus may have been different from the way that the Church and its creeds describe him. Indeed, he may even be opposed to the Church. Subversive and dangerous thoughts, indeed!

Still, conservative scholars like Luke Timothy Johnson remind us that the churches—those multinational religious corporations with immense vested interests in keeping things as they are—persist in their claim to exclusive rights over the Jesus product. Never mind what Jesus may actually have been like, or what the critical scholars can recover of the historical Jesus, the genuine article is the Jesus offered to the world by the Church.

They may no longer have coercive powers to detain and punish dissenters, but the churches hold out the prospect of eternal damnation for those bold enough to challenge their traditional monopoly over the Jesus label.

In fact, of course, the situation has always been rather more complex. It is simply not the case that Jesus has only been of concern to orthodox and catholic Christians, or that the understanding of Jesus adopted by the ancient councils of the Church (under imperial patronage) was the only way to make sense of his life and death.

There was **considerable diversity in Christian interpretations of Jesus** during the first hundred years or so after his death. What we find are different groups of “Jesus communities” contesting one another’s claims to be the custodians and interpreters of his legacy.

John Dominic Crossan identifies a tension between what he calls the “Life Tradition” and the “Death Tradition” in earliest Christianity.¹² The **Life Tradition** is to be seen in those groups who especially emphasized the life of Jesus—what he said, what he did—rather than making the

¹² *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering what happened in the years immediately after the execution of Jesus.* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998). The “Life Tradition” is a major theme in Parts VI through VIII, while the “Death Tradition” is the major focus in Parts IX and X.

cross and resurrection the focal point of their interpretation of Jesus. These traditions appear to be very early, and to be especially found in the *Sayings Gospel Q* and the *Gospel of Thomas*; neither of which display any interest in Jesus' death.

The emerging **Death Tradition**, on the other hand, would prevail in time and assert itself as the only valid interpretation of Jesus. Paul's letters show us that this tradition is also very ancient, but that it had roots in communities outside Palestine and well away from the Q communities in Galilee where the living Jesus was a known and remembered figure. In the Death Tradition, Jesus was re-imagined as a semi-divine figure whose death on the cross was the culmination of a secret (but eternal) divine plan to overcome division and evil within the cosmos, and to bring everything back into perfect union under God.

I note in passing, how odd it seems that the interpretation of Jesus found in *Thomas* and some other extra-canonical texts can be rejected as a Gnostic reinterpretation of Jesus, while the mythic themes of the Pauline Christ-cult are embraced. Both the Death Tradition and the Life Tradition were indebted to their cultural context. Where they differed was not over their gnosticizing tendencies, but in their focus on the life or the death of Jesus.

Those contests within earliest Christianity over the Jesus legacy are well-known to students of the New Testament.

One of the defining debates concerned the **inclusion of Gentiles** in the early Jesus movement. At the heart of that contest was a struggle over the interpretation of Jesus: as a figure of significance for all humanity, or simply someone of importance for the Jewish nation.

The **Sayings Gospel Q** seems to reflect the continuation of a prophetic Jesus movement within the Galilean villages and towns,¹³ while the later gospels attributed to *Matthew* and *Luke* indicate the rise of more literate or scribal circles within the Jesus communities. *The Didache* reminds us that many of these questions remained unresolved towards the end of the first century but that the tide of history lay with the householders and their local pastors, rather than with the itinerant prophets with their roots in the Q communities and the practice of Jesus.

Much of **Paul's theology** was fashioned on the anvil of the debate about the inclusion of the Gentiles, but his powerful reinterpretation of Jesus as a semi-divine Christ figure in a Hellenistic religion that included initiation rituals and a cult meal was not well-received at first. The later

¹³ See John S. Kloppenborg-Verbin, *Excavating Q: The history and setting of the Sayings Gospel*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) for a discussion of the current state of Q studies from a senior member of the International Q Project.

success of Paul's Christ cult as the dominant form of Christianity should not blind us to the diversity of interpretations of Jesus during the first 100 years after his death.

The **Johannine writings** within the New Testament represent another set of claims to the legacy of Jesus. The Johannine communities were in a contest with Torah-observant Judaism and with the so-called "apostolic churches."¹⁴ They were also communities beset by internal dissent over the interpretation of Jesus. It is here that the label "antichrist" is created—a label that would come to be applied to anyone whose credentials the Church hierarchy wished to impugn.¹⁵

As we move to the second and third centuries we observe that the **struggles against heresy** increasingly occupied the minds and energies of the bishops. Their opponents were maligned as Gnostics and worse, but would mostly have identified themselves as "Christians." In time they were to be the losers in the flow of history, as the "catholic" party secured the patronage of Constantine and set about the task of suppressing both the Gnostics and "heretics" such as the Arians. It was, of course, a challenging time to be a Church leader since the definition of true doctrine and heresy depended in large measure upon which group had the confidence of the emperor. In time, however, alternative voices were largely suppressed and—aided by imperial patronage—creedal Christianity flourished.

There were—and are still—alternative ways of understanding Jesus, but the creedal Christ has been established as the authentic brand in the religion marketplace of the western world for more than 1,600 years. It enjoys a certain market dominance!

Pushed to the edges of history were **the Jews**. They more than any other community have a particular interest in Jesus. After centuries of mutual fear and recrimination, Jewish scholars are emerging from the shadows of the ghetto to engage their Christian counterparts and to reclaim Jesus as the most important Jewish figure of all time.¹⁶ Such claims startle many Christians. A Jewish Jesus? But why not? Or better, what else? The dangerous memory of the religion of Jesus the Jew has been largely obscured in the beliefs and practices of the Church that claims ownership of his legacy. Might it not be that a Jewish perspective on their most famous son could release that dangerous memory once more within the churches as well as in other parts of our society?

¹⁴ Raymond E. Brown (*The Gospel According to John*. 2 vols. Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1966-1970). suggested up to five other groups were in the mind of the redactor.

¹⁵ See Gregory C. Jenks, *The Origins and Early Development of the Antichrist Myth*. (BZNW 59. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991).

¹⁶ In addition to the major work done by Geza Vermes over several decades (see Works Cited), it is interesting to note the observation of David Flusser that he considered that the most important thing he could achieve as an Orthodox Jew was to make the teachings of Jesus more widely known for the sake of the world.

In the wake of September 11 it is important to recall that **Muslims** have a long tradition of honouring Jesus, and identifying him closely with the spiritual wisdom at the heart of their faith.¹⁷ Just as Christians have had to find a way to integrate Abraham, Moses and David—not to mention John the Baptist—into our religious tradition, so Muslims have had to come to terms with Jesus. Indeed, it might be argued that in some ways they have done a better job of preserving the subversive and dangerous memory of Jesus than creedal Christianity has managed.

In more recent times, **Hindus and Buddhists** have needed to come to terms with this Jesus figure as well. As western culture has come to dominate the globe, people far beyond the traditional reach of the Jesus tradition have been subjected to the twin pressures of evangelization and assimilation. In the process they have been forced to address the question of this figure with such a pervasive influence in the West. They have a legitimate interest in the Jesus legacy, and especially if there is a side to Jesus that has been obscured and betrayed by the dominant images presented by Church and empire. How does the reading of the Sacred which Jesus represents relate to their own ways of relating to the Sacred?

New Age seekers—and John Shelby Spong's **church alumni association**—both have their own stake in the recovery and reinterpretation of Jesus. These people no longer find the churches' claim to a monopoly over the Jesus label to be persuasive. They assert a rival claim to Jesus and may find in him inspiration for their own location as critics of a corrupt religious establishment. Perhaps to our surprise, Jesus functions as a significant spiritual figure for them as well.

In a sense, the success of the once-Christian West in imposing our cultural norms on the other two-thirds of humanity, means that we have exported Jesus as cultural icon into the emerging global society. The churches find themselves as the traditional brand owners, but no longer with a legal title that others recognize as conferring exclusive rights to Jesus.

The modern quest for the historical Jesus may have been triggered by the spiritual needs of European Christians, but it is now of interest to a kaleidoscope of peoples and communities few of whom are concerned to defend traditional Christian doctrines. Jesus has passed into the public domain of the global culture, and his legacy is no longer the exclusive property of the churches. We all have an interest in how the future of what Jesus started is worked out, whether or not we identify ourselves as Christian.

¹⁷ Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) has helped to make the rich legacy of Islamic texts about Jesus more accessible. Note also how Jesus features in Sufi writings such as the poetry of Rumi.

Meanwhile the **myth of a uniform Christian orthodoxy** lingers. It has never been more than the dream of powerful prelates who wished to impose control over the lives of others. But it has been a persistent delusion in the West, and it serves as a continuing temptation to the fundamentalist who yearns for a simpler time when belief was uncomplicated.¹⁸

The reality is that from its first beginnings in the life of Jesus and then in the uncertain continuation of his movement after his death, Christianity has always been a minefield of contested interpretations. Is this man “from God” or “from Beelzebul?” Must we leave house and kin, or can we celebrate God’s *basileia* in our own village? Is Paul’s gospel the eternal truth of God? Or Peter’s? James’? Apollos’?

As it happens, that diversity is even celebrated within the New Testament canon with the inclusion of four Gospels, rather than a single interpretation of Jesus. What a happy historical accident! The Church achieved better than it understood in that choice.

If the dangerous and subversive memory of Jesus has survived within the community of the Church, as I believe it has, then that is no small testimony to the power of that memory to persist among the little people and to inspire fresh outbreaks of creativity in various times and places.

Almost one hundred years ago, Albert Schweitzer described historical Jesus studies as a “school of honesty” for Christian theology. He was of the view that we reveal our own true selves when we set about the task of writing a Life of Jesus. He notes:

... those who tried to bring Jesus to life at the call of love found it a cruel task to be honest. The critical study of the life of Jesus was a school of honesty for theology.¹⁹

That observation comes from someone who had just reviewed the efforts, by various scholars over more than 100 years, to present a critical historical account of Jesus: what was he like, what did he say, what did he do, what did it all mean? It reminds us that coming face to face—or at least reasonably close—to the historical Jesus will not be a comfortable experience. The Jesus who trod the pathways of ancient Palestine is a stranger to our times and to our churches, and we may not find it easy to take on board what he has to say to us.

¹⁸ See especially Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).

¹⁹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. (1906. Complete Edition. London: SCM, 2000), 7.

Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer develops a similar thesis in his book-length study, *Jesus Against Christianity*. He notes the ways in which the legacy of Jesus' own life and faith has been betrayed by Christianity. Nelson-Pallmeyer stresses that it is **the life and faith of Jesus himself** that is truly foundational for people of Christian faith; not assent to biblical narratives or creedal assertions about Jesus.

... for Christians Jesus' life in the Spirit *is* the alternative building block for faith. Jesus' life, faith and revelation of an infinitely compassionate God are fertile fields within which to plant our hope and our lives.²⁰

As we move into the final section of this address, we can note that the churches' traditional claim to an exclusive monopoly over the legacy of Jesus is not only contested, but seems decidedly shaky. Not only are there other stakeholders with a claim on the legacy, but the essence of the Jesus legacy seems so contrary to the dominant culture within the churches that one wonders whether the churches have not voided their own claim. Can the religion that has so often betrayed Jesus—as it has accepted and clung to power over others—still serve as the primary vehicle for transmitting his vision to the world?

Living out the future of what Jesus started

This address began with an invitation and a challenge. To my mind, the best response to the challenge is to take up the invitation and see if we can identify what it would be like to have human communities that are committed to living out the future of what Jesus started. Where is the dangerous memory of Jesus being kept alive in our time? If not in the churches, then where?

The memory of this ancient figure is indeed a dangerous thing to keep alive. As already noted, it does not fit well with the 2,000 year old tradition that claims to speak for Jesus. This misfit of Jesus and his most enthusiastic followers is one of the things that we must address when looking for places where the future of what Jesus started is being lived out today.

To start with, Jesus must be rescued from his fundamentalist friends: whether they be armed with Bible, prayer book or apostolic succession. In the end there is not much to choose between militant conservatives convinced that some past formula of faith provides them with the means to control the future of faith.

²⁰ *Jesus Against Christianity*, 335.

What is involved is no less than a choice between the Bible and Jesus, or between Church and Jesus, depending upon the variety of fundamentalist encountered. In both cases the choice itself sounds impossible at first hearing, but is worth a second thought.

The conservatives—including even such fine scholars as Luke Timothy Johnson—will tell us that it is the second order traditions about Jesus that matter most, not the first order information about the practice and teachings of Jesus himself. Now this is very strange.

They are happy enough to suggest that historical truth matters while ever we agree to equate that truth with the traditional accounts of the Gospels and the creeds. But as soon as the Gospels are shown to be already second or third generation interpretations of Jesus, we find that history is discounted as inimical to “true faith” and we are urged to trust the Church’s eternal witness to the Christ event rather than the shifting sands of historical reconstructions.

Without claiming finality for any current or future reconstructions of the historical Jesus, we can assert that our best information about Jesus and the times in which he lived are vital clues for our task of keeping alive his memory within the Church and setting about the task of living out the future of what he began.

Contrary to Bultmann, we do need to know more than that there was once a person called Jesus who died on a cross. We need to know, as best we can, how he saw life within his vision of God’s *basileia*. How he integrated those insights with the society in which he lived. How he responded to the traditional expressions of religion in his community.

If—as is certainly the case—our best current accounts of Jesus will always have gaps in them, so be it. We must work with what we have. The historians’ proposals are still far more realistic accounts than what we find in the New Testament, even though those accounts give us precious insights into some of the ways that the earliest Christians tried to make sense of the Jesus tradition.

Indeed it is by paying careful and critical attention to those ancient accounts that we gain fresh insights into the historical Jesus. We can glimpse both the original vision and its early distortions as we seek to build *basileia* circles in our own time. As a result, we are better placed to fashion *basileia* communities that are less shaped by the imperial culture of ancient Rome and the mercantile empires of the modern world.

If the dangerous memory of Jesus is not likely to be found in the synods and conventions of the contemporary churches, how will we recognize it in other places? What are some of the **hallmarks of this subversive sage** that even his followers often seek to keep out of our churches?

Here is a preliminary list of such hallmarks. I will suggest five, but doubtless there are others.

First of all, since—as Marcus Borg would say²¹—Jesus was a Spirit-person, one of the hallmarks of his memory being kept alive will be a capacity to engage with the classic spiritual traditions of our global community. Jesus lived from within his own Jewish tradition, and yet had the freedom to critique it and even initiate a renewal movement that would ultimately move beyond the limits that his Jewish tradition acknowledged. He could well have been asked why he stayed in the Jewish tradition given what he apparently believed about God’s *basileia*, but he chose not to leave it even when it killed him.

That capacity to glimpse God’s *basileia* will be the **second** hallmark of a community that seeks to live out the future of what Jesus started. Contemporary insights into that divine order may not capture the same vision that Jesus glimpsed, but they will surely recognise the compassionate and generous nature of the Sacred that seems to have been foundational to his vision of God. This captivating holiness will be experienced as non-violent and invitational, rather than as coercive and imperious.

Thirdly, such glimpses into the sacred heart of the universe will be expressed in a provocative wit and wisdom that subverts the ordinary and tests whether we really have eyes that see and ears that hear. That subversive wisdom will trade in the everyday stuff of real people’s lives, not in the scholars’ love of ancient texts or the abstract doctrines of the churchmen. Such wisdom will prove itself Sophia’s child by its capacity to confront evil without becoming violent and coercive.²²

Fourthly, around such people inclusive and transformative communities will take form. In the places where the future of what Jesus began is being lived out, the lame will walk and the blind will see. In exchange for the message of the *basileia* and the blessing of healing, doors will open and tables will be set. In the absence of power brokers, these will be safe places to experiment with the realities of *basileia*. There will be no conditions for participation beyond a desire to take part. It will not be necessary to be correct. All that matters is that we are there.

The **fifth hallmark** is rather more sombre. In the communities where the dangerous memory of Jesus is being kept alive there will be suffering. There will be no late night camels out of Jerusalem for those who have glimpsed God’s *basileia*. While death will not be glorified, sometimes faithfulness means yielding to death rather than dying to truth. Most of the deaths will be little

²¹ *Jesus. A New Vision. Spirit, culture and the life of discipleship.* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987).

²² Walter Wink has written on these themes. See *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium.* (New York: Galilee Doubleday, 1998). In a recent essay, “Nonviolence for the Violent” *The Fourth R* 14/5 (Sept–Oct 2001) 3–5, Wink notes the provocative character of several of the core Jesus sayings.

ones, and all the more tempting to avoid for that reason. But faithfulness in the small things is just as important within the *basileia* as faithfulness in the major things.

If I am right in identifying these as some of the hallmarks of the dangerous memory of Jesus, where might we expect to find communities seeking to live out the future of what Jesus began?

I appreciate Elizabeth Johnson's instinct that this is the fundamental calling of the Church. I agree with her that keeping the dangerous memory of Jesus alive should be what the Church is best known for. But history suggests otherwise and, as we have seen, there are other parties who also have a claim to be custodians of the legacy of Jesus in our time.

My hunch is that there is already a diverse array of places where the future of what Jesus started is being lived out, even if the influence of Jesus and his vision of the *basileia* is not a conscious reality. This is not simply another version of the anonymous Christians argument. Let's be quite plain about that. A whole host of people and organizations are promoting what *we* would identify as the *basileia* without ever being connected with the legacy of Jesus. They are not Christians, they have absolutely no need to be connected to the Jesus tradition, and I have no need to convert them!

What they—and we—have in common with Jesus is a glimpse into the *basileia* dynamics of life. Somewhere at some time their tradition, be it ancient or recent in origin, has caught a glimpse of the Sacred. To the extent that they are seeking to realise those *basileia* principles in their own lives and in their communities we are all engaged in living out the future of what Jesus started.

They may choose to stake a claim to the Jesus label themselves, but I have no need to impose it on others nor to withhold it from anyone. I am more interested in identifying common ground than in erecting billboards.

But there remains the matter of those of us who explicitly identify ourselves and our communities with the legacy of Jesus. Surely in our faith communities, at least, we can hope to find places where the future of what Jesus started is not only being lived out but also places where his dangerous memory is being kept alive?

In the end, I suspect that is why I remain in the Church and why I continue as a priest.

Here—at least in my dreams and occasionally in real life—I find myself in the company of other people who are indeed keeping the dangerous memory of Jesus alive. In their company I find that I can be a person of faith. Perhaps no longer believing *in* Jesus, but certainly someone believing *with* Jesus.

WORKS CITED

- Armstrong, Karen, *The Battle for God*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).
- Borg, Marcus J., *Jesus. A New Vision. Spirit, culture and the life of discipleship*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987).
- Brown, Raymond E., *The Gospel According to John*. (2 vols. Anchor Bible, 29. New York: Doubleday, 1966-1970).
- Crossan, John Dominic, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering what happened in the years immediately after the execution of Jesus*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).
- and Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001)
- Flusser, David, *Jesus* (3rd edition. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001).
- Funk, Robert W., Roy W. Hoover & the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. (New York: Macmillan, 1993).
- Jenks, Gregory C., *The Origins and Early Development of the Antichrist Myth*. (BZNW 59. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991).
- Johnson, Elizabeth A., “The Word was Made Flesh and Dwelt Among Us. Jesus Research and Christian Faith.” in Doris Donnelly (ed), *Jesus. A Colloquium in the Holy Land*. (New York: Continuum, 2001) 146-166.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997)
- , *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999).
- Khalidi, Tarif, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
- Kloppenborg-Verbin, John S., *Excavating Q: The history and setting of the Sayings Gospel*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).
- Nelson-Pallmeyer, Jack, *Jesus Against Christianity: Reclaiming the Missing Jesus*. (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001)
- Schweitzer, Albert, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. (1906. Complete Edition. London: SCM, 2000)
- Smith, Mahlon H., “DOING and UNDOING the WORD: Jesus & the Dialectics of Christology.” *Westar Institute Seminar Papers*, Fall 2000.
- Spong, John Shelby, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why traditional faith is dying and a new faith is being born*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).
- Vermes, Geza, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels*. (Revised edition. London: SCM Press, 1981).
- , *Jesus and the World of Judaism*. (London: SCM Press, 1983).
- , *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1993).
- , *The Changing Faces of Jesus*. (London: Penguin Books, 2001).
- Wink, Walter, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*. (New York: Galilee Doubleday, 1998).
- , “Nonviolence for the Violent” *The Fourth R* 14/5 (Sept–Oct 2001) 3–5.