

Searching for Jesus

The Jesus of my childhood was a white bread, Protestant, sort of Jesus: smiling, loving, light-skinned with blond highlights in his long brown hair. One of the first songs I learned was “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so, little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong. Yes, Jesus, loves me, yes, Jesus loves me, yes, Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so.”

We learned some of the benign teachings like the Golden Rule and loving your neighbor. We heard a few parables, like the Good Samaritan — but not the parables that were a little more confusing. The Liberal Protestant churches that my family attended in the early 1950’s taught their children of a benign and loving, but not of a very challenging Jesus. They didn’t scare us with Hell, the way my neighbor, Kathleen O’Halloran, was being taught in her Catholic church. Our Jesus was nice, not looking for us to mess up — and, at least in my Sunday Schools, he always seemed to have a soft spot for kids. In retrospect, the Jesus I heard about back then, was much more a reflection of the culture and the times than of anything timeless or anyone historical. Still, there was more of a focus on Jesus as a human personage than on miracles and salvation.

It was only when, in later years, I started hearing much more about Christ and Salvation and much less about Jesus, the human being, that I started tuning out.

For most Christians, through most of history, Jesus the man was almost an afterthought. It is interesting, although perhaps not surprising, that the two great festivals of the Christian calendar celebrate the birth and the events surrounding the death of Jesus. The birth story is agreed by all but the most fundamentalist Christians to be a mythic, non-historical story: true in a metaphorical sense perhaps, but not in an historical one. More important, perhaps, is that neither celebrates the life and ministry of Jesus, but rather focuses on Jesus as Messiah, not man. My colleague, Forrest Church, points out that the Nicene Creed, the statement which codified orthodox, Trinitarian, Christian belief is entirely an affirmation about Jesus’s birth and death and not about his life or teachings. The only thing it says about Jesus is “he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered, died, and was buried.” “Born of a virgin” and “killed by Pilate” is all the creed says about Jesus’ life.

Modern Jesus scholar, Marcus Borg, talks about the pre-Easter Jesus by which he means the human Jesus who existed and walked the earth before his crucifixion. And then he talks about the post-Easter Jesus, the Jesus Christ of traditional Christian faith. The Jesus before Easter can be a matter for scholarly study using a variety of academic methods. The post-Easter Jesus is a matter of Christian theology and not our topic for the morning. This is appropriate because Unitarians were always very interested in the pre-Easter Jesus. That is what got us called heretics.

Even in our beginnings here in America, when all Unitarians and all Universalists considered themselves Christians, they emphasized the pre-Easter Jesus in most of what they wrote and preached about him.

They were, in fact, an important part of a larger theological movement within Christianity which, in trying to reconcile the more rationalistic and scientific worldview with religion characteristic of the Enlightenment, tried to explain the stories in the Bible in more rationalistic terms. For example, one of the great early controversies in 19th century Unitarianism was over miracles — especially miracles that went against nature like parting the waters or stopping the sun. A large faction thought the miracles either were fiction by the imaginative or had some rational explanation. Jesus walking on the water, for example, might be explained by supposing that he was not literally walking on water but rather on a sandbar just beneath the surface of the water that made him “appear” to be walking on water.

Our third president, Thomas Jefferson, wrote several books on Jesus from a more naturalistic and historical point of view, and created a Bible of his own which picks out the sayings and teachings of Jesus and leaves out the miracles and other unbelievable parts of the stories. Jefferson literally took a scissors and cut the sayings of Jesus out of the Bible and pasted them into his new, Jefferson Bible — a much more laborious proposition in those days than in “our” day of Microsoft Word.

In human history, there are few people who have been talked about or written about more than Jesus has been — and there are few, if any, whose reputation and motivation seem to have changed so often through the centuries. The Jesus of the early church is quite different from the Jesus of the Middle Ages; the Jesus of the Reformation is quite different from the Jesus of the Enlightenment. Throughout the 20th century the images of Jesus multiplied.

For most of history, people based their views and interpretations of who Jesus was completely upon the teachings of the church and the reading of the New Testament. But about the time that liberal religion was being reborn in the U.S., Europeans were starting to take a more scientific and academic look at the Bible and, therefore, at Jesus. They looked at who wrote the Gospels, why they wrote them, and why they differ from and sometimes contradict one another. They began to discover that the people who wrote about Jesus, wrote many, many years after his death and could not only never have met him themselves, but also were highly unlikely even to have spoken to someone who had a firsthand experience with Jesus.

They discovered that each Gospel writer had clearly defined views and goals: for example, Matthew was trying to convince Jews that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah that they had been waiting for, while Luke was trying to evangelize Gentiles. The view today and for a long time is that the Gospels were not trying to be historical accounts, but rather their purpose was to present teachings and stories from the point of view of the early Christian Church. Thus the Gospels became a mixture of actual events and sayings of Jesus and of the theology and ideas of the Early Church itself. Another discovery was that, beyond the ones that made it into the Bible, there were lots of stories and writings about Jesus or sayings attributed to Jesus, which were useful in tracing where the stories and sayings might have originated and which might go back to Jesus.

Initially, the 18th and 19th century studies of Jesus emphasized his humanity. They looked at the time in which he lived and became aware of the political volatility of his times and the possibility that he might have been seen as or even been a political revolutionary. They

emphasized the spiritually revolutionary quality of his message. They de-emphasized the aspects of the story that seemed scientifically unlikely.

Some supposed that it was the disciples who put forward about stories of the resurrection to enhance their position as itinerant preachers. Later in the 19th century, von Harnack wrote a book suggesting that the three important elements of Jesus' teachings were that the Kingdom of God was coming — meaning the rule of God in human hearts, that the commandment of Love was higher than any other rule, and that the human soul was of infinite value.

The very strong movement for the study of the historical Jesus, which was augmented by archeological discoveries, came in the early 20th century. One of the best known of the Jesus scholars of that era was Albert Schweitzer, the former seminary president who became world famous for his efforts to help the poor in Africa as a medical doctor. Schweitzer's portrait of Jesus was far different from the Jesus of the 19th century rationalists. He took seriously the many references to the coming of the Kingdom of God. While in the 19th century these references were taken to refer to a state of mind here on earth, Schweitzer, in studying the historical period involved, discerned that the statements were, instead, part of an apocalyptic vision that was extremely common in the unsettled times of first century Palestine.

A great many people of that time believed that the end of the world was coming soon, and Schweitzer's theory was that Jesus was one of them and that his preaching was aimed at preparing people spiritually for that end. The revolutionary ethics that he preached, said Schweitzer, were not the goal but rather an interim ethic between the time the hearers heard Jesus and the time when the world was no more and all would ascend to heaven — or be swallowed up in hell. In this view, Jesus deliberately provoked his own death in order to hasten the end of the world, and his last words, "Oh my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" are a cry of despair as he discerns that his death has not brought on the coming of End Times. In Schweitzer's view, Jesus, the failed prophet, becomes almost irrelevant to Christian theology and it is only the post-Easter Jesus that is of significance.

This view of Jesus as a prophet predicting the imminent end of the world persisted among Jesus scholars for most of the 20th century, although there were dissenters. Some believed that this portrait was not historical, but rather was super-imposed by the early Christians, who were most certainly believers in the imminent end of the world and who had, between the time of Jesus' death and the writing of the Gospels, gone through a period of intense war and strife. In the 20th century there also began to be a more sophisticated understanding of myth — the understanding that many of the stories about Jesus, such as the birth narratives, were not meant to be understood as true history but rather as a poetical, mythic way of talking about a religious figure.

Still, I confess, when I met up with this view of Jesus as the failed end-of-the-world prophet, a view which still predominated during my seminary studies in the late 1970's, I lost any remaining interest I had in Jesus. A true Unitarian Universalist at heart, I guess, I could not make much theological sense from the post-Easter Jesus and the pre-Easter Jesus was made to seem a tragic but not spiritually compelling figure.

But shortly after I left school, the study of the historical Jesus underwent a renaissance. Previous scholarship on Jesus had been strongly based in theology. Now, the study of Jesus was highly influenced by archaeology, anthropology, historical sociology, and history of religions. There were new archaeological findings including new manuscripts that were incorporated into those studies. There was an increased knowledge of the world Jesus lived in, the historical context, due to new archeological findings. And scholars had gained a greatly increased understanding of the worldview of religions worldwide, and an increased understanding of the worldview which informed religion in first century Palestine.

Some of these findings led to very concrete knowledge, such as, for example, that the average Palestinian man of the times was five feet tall and weighed about a hundred and ten pounds — so we can expect that Jesus was about that size. A carpenter was not a builder of buildings and didn't do major construction. So Jesus' profession was probably building very basic furniture and his social status was lower than a peasant farmer and only a little above the untouchables of Jewish society, such as shepherds and tax collectors.

The area in which Jesus grew up was far more cosmopolitan than previously imagined and a great many people of the time were bi-lingual, so that it is likely that even though Jesus was poor he may have spoken Greek, had a little education, possibly even have attended some theater as a young man. The Roman rule was hard on the Jewish community of the time, and the taxes of the Romans made it difficult for the Jewish religious institution to collect their customary taxes on top of that. That is one of the reasons that tax collectors were outcasts: they hurt Judaism. Within Judaism there were many different factions and movements: both political revolutionaries who wanted to overthrow the Roman Empire, and several branches of spiritual revolutionaries that wanted to purify or renew Judaism. This is the context that modern scholars come to in looking at who Jesus was.

To my relief, modern American scholars have come to regard the end-of-the-world Prophet as not the real Jesus but one invented by the early church. There is debate, but most scholars do not believe that Jesus saw himself as the founder of a new religion nor did he see himself in Messianic terms. Rather, he was in the tradition of renewing Judaism. The Jesus movement was a Jewish renewal movement. In my study there were three important insights that renewed my interest in Jesus.

One of the insights coming from the modern study of anthropology and the history of religions was to see Jesus in the worldwide tradition of a holy man — not unlike the shamans of the Native American tribes, the mullahs of the Arabs, the gurus of the East. The Holy Man is a person with a direct experience of the Holy unmediated by traditions or teachings. The Holy Man knows God up close and personal. In the Hebrew Tradition, Moses and Elijah were such men. Holy men spend long hours in prayer and meditation. The Holy Men are close to God or to the Holy. They are often healers — even at a distance — like the Shamans of Native American tribes or the Hindu Holy men of India. Characteristically they have visions — especially when undergoing some kind of extended ordeal — such as Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness. The Holy Man communicates to people directly from God because of his close personal experience with God. One sign of Jesus' intimate relation with God is that he refers to Him not as Father but using a term more equivalent to "Daddy." One of the markers suggesting

others regarded him as a holy man is the constant refrain that he spoke like one “with Authority” meaning that his authority came straight from God.

It is now widely believed by scholars that the parts of the Bible most likely to date back to the pre-Easter Jesus are the parables and sayings. These scholars point to these teachings and their meaning in the context of their time to suggest a second insight: that a major aspect of Jesus’ persona was that of a teacher of subversive wisdom. In most parables, those who follow society’s rules and expectations are over-ruled by some other, spiritual consideration. Take the parable of the Good Samaritan. Those who pass by the injured man are, in fact, doing what their society expects. In that time, a dead person — and that is what the man appeared to be — was regarded as ritually unclean. Thus, the men who pass by are keeping themselves ritually pure so as to be able to do their religious duty. The Samaritan, who was part of a group despised by the listeners of the parable, does not follow the traditional ways of purity and in so doing saves the man’s life. This little parable is not just, then, about helping someone. It is also, more deeply suggesting that those who appear to be good by following the rules and rituals of society are in actuality less admirable than this terrible outcast who flouts the rules and saves another human being. As you go through the parables you will see the conventional wisdom flouted in favor of a deeper spirituality. In the Prodigal Son, there is the rule following older brother who is dismayed when his younger brother is still beloved even when he has flouted all the rules. In that story it is the Father who shows subversive wisdom in his love and forgiveness. Almost all of Jesus’ teachings subverted a rule-following Judaism in favor of a Judaism that followed a deeper spiritual wisdom.

A third element that modern scholars point to about the historical Jesus was his radical openness to all kinds of people. He associated with prostitutes and tax collectors. He touched those who were ill and feared not the dying. He gave women a high place and conversed with them in an egalitarian manner. This was particularly revolutionary in a time and place in which women were seen and not heard and went around veiled in public places. In first century Palestine you could walk around in public for hours without even seeing a woman, while Jesus has women as a part of his movement, eating and conversing with him. One of the things that we moderns miss about the nativity story is the position of the shepherds in those times. It wasn’t just that shepherds were low class — they were unclean outcasts like the tax collectors and prostitutes — so the story’s account that they are the first to greet the baby Jesus signals, symbolically, that he will have a special relationship with the outcasts. As a Universalist, I find this radical egalitarianism of the historical Jesus, particularly attractive.

This modern perspective of Jesus as holy man, teacher of subversive wisdom, and radical egalitarian is a far more attractive one to me, and, I suspect, for most Unitarian-Universalists than the idea of Jesus as a failed End-of-the-World Prophet. The portrait of a Jesus that examines traditions and goes deeper for spiritual wisdom fits our iconoclastic impulses. The radical egalitarianism is welcome in a religion which itself has a strong impulse to welcome those who are not always welcomed in traditional religions. Some of us may find Jesus the Holy Man a bit more problematical, although I find him the more compelling for being placed in a tradition of Holy People with direct experience of God — and not foreign to the transcendentalists and mystics among us.

Of course the important thing about Jesus is not so much who he is or was but our own relationship to him. Most here, probably do not consider ourselves Christian — and yet the more I learn about Jesus from contemporary scholars, the more attractive I find him. I find his spiritual wisdom compelling. His egalitarianism is deep within my own faith. And his close relationship with the holy — makes me want to follow his example and reach out to the holy as far as I am able. I don't know whether that makes me a Christian — I don't have much relationship with a post-Easter Jesus, after all. I expect that the label itself doesn't matter. I have come to see Jesus the man as one whose spiritual wisdom was and is revolutionary. His vision was and still is compelling, however much it has been and is misunderstood and perverted by many who claim to follow him.

In this time of noise and bustle when quiet wisdom is even less easy to hear and heed, may each of us take a little time of quiet to hear the voice of the man whose birth is so loudly proclaimed but whose message is so frequently drowned out.