

JESUS AND THE HISTORICIST JESUSES

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This Thinksheet's what's come to be known in the media as a "backgrounder," which (RHD) "gives background information to clarify particular policies, actions, or newsworthy issues." Some historicist professors have broken out of some universities & made their historicist views of "the historical Jesus" a "newsworthy issue," one which should be discussed in congregations: this course is designed for 9am (pre-worship) discussion in a (my) local church.

1 **Historicist?** We can't get past the Thinksheet title till you've a fairly clear idea what this word means....Note first that many nouns ending with "-ism" mean the fanatical form of. "Scientism," such as that of recently deceased Carl Sagan, is the fanatical form of science; it elevates science as the only way to knowledge, and thus denigrates religious faith as non-knowledge, i.e. superstition. It's philosophical basis is materialism, the doctrine that reality is "nothing but" matter--so, e.g., to say "our bodies are atoms" (a scientific statement), is (to the likes of Sagan) the same as saying "we are atoms" (a scientistic statement).

As science is to scientism, history is to historicism. Indeed, historicism is, applied to history, the same fanatic narrow-mindedness that scientism is when applied to science. Indeed, one may accurately say that historicism is scientistic historiography, the doctrine that history can be written on the basis of "nothing but" (objective, verifiable) "facts." Historicists, such as the most prominent of the Jesus-Seminar professors, see themselves as producing, out of our skimpy sources, an out-there Jesus whom all right-thinking, unbiased observers should be able to agree on. Unbiased? Let's look at the Random House Dictionary on "historicism": "historians must study each period without imposing any personal or absolute value system."

2 Marx married scientism to dynamic historicism (the doctrine that while we have no right to impose our values on "history," history has a goal we should discover & adopt)--the marriage called "scientific materialism," the technical term for the philosophy grounding Marxist **communism**, the marriage of two illusions, viz. scientism & dynamic historicism. Leninist-Stalinist communism added a third illusion, viz. that the all-powerful ("totalitarian") state is viable. How much damage that evil trinity of illusions has inflicted on the earth!

3 The Jesus Seminar radicals are self-deluded historicistic illusionists, now deluding the public because they've gone public & have learned the tricks of media manipulation. Since the sources are too skimpy to permit the recovery of "the historical Jesus," they've come up with a fistful of historicistic Jesuses (the last word in this Thinksheet's title). But what's meant by "the historical Jesus"?

4 In Eng., we distinguish between historical (what actually, really, objectively happened) & historic (events which for us have specific, important significance). At least a billion people now living have vid-seen the death of JFK: it's historical (as well as historic). Nobody alive has seen the death of Jesus: combined with his resurrection, it's arguably that most historic-influential human event in the planet's past--but it isn't historical if by historical one means objective fact conformable to the canons of historical research. That Pilate executed a pestiferous Jewish populous leader is a fact of history (Ger., *Historie*), but he's known to have crucified thousands of others in that category--at one time, 5,000. By pawing over his memorabilia (the scraps his followers remembered about him & recorded, he himself having left nothing he wrote [if he indeed wrote anything]), the Jesus Seminar professors mock up each his own historical (actually, historicist) Jesus--as palentologists were thought to have "discovered" Peking Man by assembling a few bones--a fraud not exposed for many decades....But the historic Jesus is known to us Christians as (among other titles) Son of God by a different dimension of "history" (Ger., *Geschichte*, "historic" history, history as fact + meaning).

5 Now we can clear up a confusion. "Historical," as in "the historical Jesus," has **two meanings**. Traditionally it meant the historic Jesus (with his full biblical-canonical status); but some scholars in these past several centuries have used it to

mean the historicist Jesus (a "facts only" first-century Palestinian Jew).

Which one is the **real** Jesus? Will the **real** Jesus please stand up? According to the Velveteen Rabbit, you're not real till you've been loved so much all your fur's been rubbed off: love is, as Dante said, the force that "moves the worlds." But to get at how the Jesus Seminar types got their bare-bones, skinned-down Jew whose body's now been dead 20 centuries, we must run a brief excursus into philosophy, esp. the systematic thinking about what's real (called "ontology") & about how we know (called "epistemology").

6 A Church of England bishop (Berkeley, d.1753), honoring God above creation & ideas above matter, said *esse est percepti* (the experience of being perceived is what makes real)....Hume (d.1776) extended B.'s empiricism to skepticism: God is only an idea, for the mind is only a compost pile of perceptions-experiences become ideas; & we can know nothing except what's directly observable....Kant (d.1804) countered Hume's skeptical notion that reason is useless for understanding the world, but he countered also the Enlightenment's excessive trust in & dependence on reason. What's needed, he said, is to demark the domain of reason, so we know what it can & can't do. Applying this basic project to religion, he wrote RELIGION WITHIN THE BOUNDARIES (or "limits") OF PURE (or "mere") REASON (1793). Pass the historic Jesus through that sieve & what you get is the historicist Jesus. Since "pure reason" lets morality through but not religion, Jesus comes out as a moral but not a religious leader (precisely Marcus Borg's Jesus, he says, when he got his PhD on Jesus)....Reimarus (d.1768) saw Jesus as religious, but with an apocalyptic worldview that makes his religion useless to us. While Schweitzer (d.1965) agreed with Reimarus & Weiss on Jesus' eschatologism, which makes Jesus' religion strange to "modern man," he drew the radical ethical-mystical conclusion that we can know Jesus only as we "walk with" him where there are basic human needs we can meet....Lessing (d.1871), following R.'s invention of "lives of Jesus," argued that behind the Gospels lies an *Urevangelium*, a sourcebook. The theory of written, not just oral, traditions behind the Gospels has played a major role in this century's NT study & is heavy in Jesus Seminar theorizing...."Lower criticism" seeks to reconstruct ancient texts with a view to getting as close as possible to their *ipsissima verba* (exact wording): "higher criticism" seeks to put the ancient texts into the context of their provenance, the time/place in which they were produced. Early in the century before ours, Enlightenment-minded scholars began to produce historicist lives of Jesus. First came Strauss (d.1874), whose LIFE OF JESUS CRITICALLY EXAMINED (1835) treated the Gospels as myths without historical foundation, which (he later admitted) was too radical--& ended his academic career at age 28! His 1864 title--THE CHRIST OF FAITH AND THE JESUS OF HISTORY--clearly stated the split which the Jesus Seminar has widened into a canyon. (My copy of the former, the LEBEN JESU, trd. by Geo. Eliot, is 784pp of fine print; 1898, re-issue from 1848. The external split had its internal counterpart [xxx, words of Strauss]): "The author is aware that the essence of the Christian faith is perfectly independent of his criticism. The supernatural birth of Christ, his miracles, his resurrection and ascension, remain eternal truths, whatever doubts may be cast on their reality as historical facts....the security of the author's conviction that no injury is threatened to the Christian faith." But though the split seemed livable to him, as to most members of the Jesus Seminar, it was & is fatal: Jesus is reduced (as Otto Pfleiderer say in his Introduction, xviii) to only "an illustration and example....")....Next, of the influential "lives of Jesus," was Renan's LA VIE DE JÉSUS (1862; d.1892), which opened up on what we're now calling relativism (no tradition can claim absolute truth), pluralism, & multiculturalism....Then came a trajectory of attention not to reason & history but to documents, the Bible texts themselves: let "Wellhausen" (d.1918) be the personal symbol of it....Then came a trajectory looking not at reason or history or texts but at language itself: "Wittgenstein" (d.1951)....My backgrounder point? We need to locate the Jesus Seminar within the **development of the Western mind** from revelation-grounded rationalism (Catholic & Protestant scholasticism) through naturalistic (Enlightenment) rationalism through empiricism (as above) through existential rationalism (Descartes [d.1650]) through mystical rationalism (Bergson [d.1941]) to & beyond logical positivism. The bottom line is God (theism), experience (empiricism), reason (rationalism), or matter (materialism). Jesus became, & remains, a ball on this academic playingfield.