

This thinksheet is a meditation on the problem of how Jesus came to be so much like us. To put it unironically, how come Jesus so conveniently preaches whatever preachers want him to--even at points on which the preachers disagree? My answer is that the temptation to eisegesis [=reading in our meaning, so we can read it out with the sanction of antiquity and the aura of holiness, i.e. with scribal clout] is greatest as we interpret Jesus in the Gospels, for he's the one and that's the Bible section with most at stake: we are most tempted to pervert where the payoff is greatest, as is the loss from failing to lead Jesus captive to what we want to persuade ourselves and our followers to. I'm not pointing the finger and evading repentance: in my many irreconcilable shifts through a half century of consciously wrestling with the Gospels, Jesus has never failed to agree with me! With this confession of mine, the cynic will read no further in this thinksheet.

1. The perversion, unconscious or conscious, referred to in the paragraph above let's call Jesus-as-the-"inside-insider." Without making further distinctions, here I refer only to the fact that those who coopt Jesus to their "thing" have him both inside their city and inside their sermon. The opposite is "outside outsider," as Jesus was to so many of my students from other religions at the U. of Hawaii. The "inside outsider" is Jesus experienced as a stranger but with some appropriable opinions [as he is, e.g., for NeoHinduism and NeoBuddhism]. Finally, the thinksheet title has him as "outside insider," i.e. as friend and Lord but many of whose opinions-teachings-commands are shockingly strange, some even embarrassingly naive-narrow, and some almost impervious to our systems of sense-making (and therefore "mysterious" culturally and/or metaphysically). What currently irks me, here, is the cooptation of this very strangeness to lay unstrange liberal-ethical guilt trips on the faithful....essentially an ethical figure (which he was not) rather than a religious figure (which he was). According to this mode of pseudo-exegesis, "Jesus" = the other end of the real/ideal gap. His words point to, his life "reads," and the Christ-event [the entire impact of Jesus on history] symbolizes a should-ought-must applied to oneself and one's group and the world as sinful-fallen-short-of-human-ideal, a sort of ethicizing of the human potential.

2. To achieve, again unconsciously or consciously, the general and special perversions described, respectively, in the above two paragraph, one must in-read our modern consciousness. I.e., Jesus must be made to "see"--to perceive, connect, project--as we do. Since our Western mentality is more Greek than Jewish, Jesus will be made to "see" in the sense of "understand" not like an ancient Jew but like a Stoic. In the late 1920s I was hearing many liberal Protestant sermons per week, and many were Stoic extensions of "the Fatherhood of God" to "the Brotherhood of Man." The latter doctrine was a Stoic-literal extension of the biological metaphor in the former phrase. Two short steps brought us to the gospel of liberalism: (1) Jesus made this extension, and therefore preached that all men are brothers [modernly, in the 1970s, versioned as all human beings have potential for, and the right to be, persons-in-community]; and (2) Ergo, the Kingdom will be here when we transcend racial-sexual-class-credal differences [an ethical, not a religious, eschaton]. Not a shread of evidence Jesus took either step, I discovered when in 1937 Henry J. Cadbury came out with his shocker THE PERIL OF MODERNIZING JESUS (Mac/37). Chapter 5 ("Limitations of Jesus' Social Teaching") hit me so hard, attacking comfortable presumptions yet confirming the counter-cultural Jesus I'd confronted, or rather more who'd confronted me, in my radical conversion two years earlier. But I'm still hearing this 1920s liberalism preached as the gospel, and I'm perplexed as to how to counter it without seeming to undermine its humanistic values, which I share and promote. I'm in the squeeze between being an honest man and an honorable biblical scholar.

3. With Cadbury, I hold that Jesus' pointing to the character-power-will of God was so radical and steady as to relativize, while coopting for religion, the dimension of the ethical [moral-economic-social-institutional-political].

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