

## Jesus in North America (2)

Johan D. Tangelder

### Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) – the forerunner of the Jesus Seminar

The changing perspectives on Jesus show how the demonic may threaten from within the church as easily as from without. Tertullian (c.160-c.215 AD), writing amid persecution, compared the devil with a scorpion, which through heretical views, repeatedly stings the church. In America, the "father of lies" has been especially active since the 18th century American Revolution. Liberals began to attack the Biblical doctrine of sin. They promoted a new confidence that ordinary people are perfectly capable of making rational, constructive choices for themselves. Some were influenced by Unitarianism, which denies the doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus, often on the grounds that they are not taught explicitly in the New Testament.

#### Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson, third president of the US (1801-9), is revered as the author of the Declaration of Independence, the architect of the First Amendment, and one of "the saints" of American civil religion. He believed in a wall of separation between the public and the private sphere. Consequently, religion became regulated to the private realm. "Our particular principles of religion are a subject of accountability to our god alone," Jefferson wrote in a 1814 letter. "I enquire after no man's, and trouble none with mine." Jefferson was no lover of organized Christianity. For him deep devotion to Jesus' moral teachings constituted the essence of true religion. Jefferson wrote a friend: "I am a Christian, in the only sense he [Jesus] wished one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to himself every human excellence; and believing he never claimed any other." According to his biographer, Fawn M. Brodie, he "despised clergyman all his adult life" and evinced a "hatred of the established faith" that was well-nigh unparalleled in his time, and made it one of his chief aims during the Revolution to quell the power of the Anglican Church. A year before his death, he described himself as a Unitarian; several years earlier, he declined to serve as a baptismal sponsor because he did not accept the Trinity.

Jefferson was strongly influenced by the writings of the British Unitarian, Joseph Priestly. One of Priestly's books was *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782). Jefferson's own list of imagined corruptions was long, extending to the doctrines such as original sin, the virgin birth, the atonement, predestination, salvation by faith, bodily resurrection, and above all the Trinity. He denied the miracles in the Bible. He considered them an affront to the demands of reason and the laws of nature. He also called for a repudiation of the spiritual slavery of creeds and rites and a return to the pure, primitive teachings of Jesus, who was "the first of human Sages."

Jefferson believed the New Testament was corrupt. As a result it contained "the monstrosities of dogma, superstition, and priestcraft, which were the very essence of Christian orthodoxy." So he took a scissors to the New Testament and snipped out all the supernatural elements, leaving only Jesus' moral teaching of absolute love and service intact. He began to cut out the authentic passages of his two King James Bibles. The project took only two or three evenings. He found the "task obvious and easy." A nearly identical effort by the Jesus Seminar some two centuries later would take many researchers nearly a decade.

Jefferson called his micro-Testament *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*. He characterized it as "a precious morsel of ethics" and it was a thin book. He claimed that his Bible version demonstrated that he was a "real Christian." "It is a document in proof that I am a real Christian, that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus." In 1819 or 1820, Jefferson compiled a second scripture by subtraction, calling it *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, popularly known as the Jefferson Bible. It consists of a single account of Jesus' ministry made up of passages from all four Gospels; it omits the entire Old Testament, the Act of the Apostles, the Epistles, and the Book of Revelation. It omits gospel passages that seemed to Jefferson to be at odds with the spirit of Jesus. It also omits the resurrection, and ends with Jesus being laid in his tomb. Jefferson's aim was to remove from the gospel all things that, in his view, had obviously been added on by the gospel writers themselves. Jefferson had no use for the apostle Paul. "Like other Enlightenment rationalists," writes historian Jaroslav Pelikan, "Jefferson was convinced that the real villain in the Christian story was the apostle Paul, who had corrupted the religion of Jesus into a religion about Jesus." He dismissed his detractors as imposters peddling a counterfeit faith. He argued that religion is necessary for the well-being of the nation. He said that his version of "purified Christianity could promote moral health in the actual setting of eighteenth-century America." He was optimistic about the future of his faith. He wrote in 1822, "I confidently expect that the present generation will see Unitarianism become the general religion of the United States."

## **The Jesus Seminar**

Jefferson's legacy in American religion is at least as long as it is in politics. His influence is particularly apparent in the case of the "Jesus Seminar." It was formed in 1985 to examine all the sayings attributed to Jesus in the New Testament and other early Christian documents. Its aim is to free the real Jesus of history from the fetters of traditional Christian creeds and the writings of Peter and Paul to enable Jesus to be himself. But its agenda is not purely academic. It is an agenda for the church. Co-founder of the Jesus Seminar and self-styled provocateur, Robert Funk says that the Seminar aims "to liberate Jesus. The only Jesus most people know is the mystic one. They don't want the real Jesus, they want the one they can worship. The cultic Jesus." He calls Jesus "the first stand-up comic." His Jesus is an "irreligious, irreverent, and impious...secular sage." He also admits that the Seminar offers "a wholly secular account of the Christian faith."

Today, the debate about Jesus is no longer confined to closed academic circles. The Seminar scholars now wage their battle through the public media. John Dominic Crossan, professor of New Testament at DePaul University, one of the most famous theologians involved in the Jesus Seminar, states that there is an implicit objective: "You scholars can go off to the universities and write in the journals and say anything you want. Now," Crossan says, "scholars are coming out of the closet," demanding public attention for the way they think." And Crossan is publicly heralding what he thinks: he denies the deity of Christ, declares that the virgin birth in Bethlehem is myth-making by the writers of the Gospels, and concludes that the stories of Jesus's death, burial and resurrection were latter-day wishful thinking of the early church. He says that Jesus never quoted Scripture or compared his teaching to that of the laws of Moses. He never even hinted that he might consider himself to be some kind of a Messiah. He never predicted the future, never envisioned his coming crucifixion, and never spoke about God's judgment. Who then is Jesus according to Crossan? He produced a Jesus who is not Jewish in his teaching but more like a Greek wisdom teacher or philosopher, a

postmodern American guru who is against sexism, imperialism and all the oppressiveness of the Roman empire.

In *Meeting Jesus for the First Time. The Historical Jesus & The Heart of Contemporary Faith*, Jesus Seminar fellow Marcus J. Borg drives a sharp wedge between the *Jesus of history* and the *Christ of faith*. The first phrase refers to Jesus as the particular person he was – Jesus of Nazareth, a Galilean Jew of the first century who was executed by the Romans. The second phrase refers to the Christ of the developing Christian tradition – namely, what Jesus became in the faith of the early Christian communities in the decades after his death. He calls Jesus "a spirit person, subversive sage, social prophet, and founder of a movement whose social vision was shaped by the core value of compassion."

To discover what Jesus really said, the Seminar fellows use a strange method. They are not asked for a simple yea or nay when voting to determine what Jesus really said. They are instructed instead to cast one of four coloured beads into a ballot box. They are to choose red if "Jesus said it or something very close to it" and pink if "Jesus probably said something like it, although his words have suffered in transmission." The final alternatives are gray (These are not his words, but the ideas are close to his own"), and black ("Jesus did not say it; the words represent the Christian community or a later point of view.")

In 1993 the Seminar published *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. This "red-letter edition" of the four canonical Gospels plus the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas became a best-seller, and put Funk and the Jesus Seminar on the map. Only 18 percent of the reputed sayings of Jesus received the coveted red or pink ratings; the remaining 82 percent were deemed inauthentic. According to their book *The Acts of Jesus: What did Jesus Really Do?* (1998), a report on the second phase of the Seminar's work, the Fellows even doubted the story of doubting Thomas. And Jesus was called a "socially promiscuous...urban party-goer." Who is the Jesus of the Jesus Seminar? According to the Seminar fellows, if we realize that Jesus is no different than any other human being, we will discover what makes Jesus so attractive to many. We discover then that Jesus was a wise sage, a pious spinner of tales and proverbs, who spoke only in short cryptic sentences, stripped of his uniqueness, his deity, and his ability to work miracles.

The Jesus Seminar fellows offer stones for bread, a faddish theology and ideology instead of the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. He is a Jesus who is no more than a crude imitation of the Jesus of Thomas Jefferson. Stephen Prothero comments, "When seen in the light of Jefferson's bibles, the work of the Jesus Seminary look like a tortured second draft." I believe that the martyred German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was right on when he warned that theologians too easily become Judases among the true disciples, wishing that Christ would conform to some humanly contrived agenda instead of putting themselves completely at His disposal.

Continue

Johan D. Tangelder