

HOW I CAME TO FORM MY (CURRENT) VIEW OF JESUS

From an early age I was sent to Sunday School, where I obediently listened to respectable working class people making outrageous claims about Jesus of Nazareth. They also read stories, from the beautiful King James Bible, which was also read daily in my secondary school. As a 20th century child I realised long before secondary school that those outrageous claims could not possibly be 'true', but I still liked to hear the Bible stories, especially because the strange richness and poetry of the language seemed to point to something mysterious and important beyond itself.

Our society and our education system now worship science, and the gospel stories are not generally 'believed in' - especially when the details of the Jesus story are not even accepted as factual by scholars and theologians who have painstakingly studied the history of Christianity and its stories. I too cannot accept the stories as literal truth, but I'm still fascinated by the myth, and though I have not been part of a Church congregation since childhood, I now attend the Church of YouTube and my views on Jesus have been shaped by such preachers as Karen Armstrong, John Spong, Dominic Crossan, Walter Wink and others.

I am not a theologian, but like many of them (as well as those mentioned above) I believe that the Bible stories were not intended to be understood as literal accounts. In any case, very little is known about Jesus, and there is no primary historical evidence. In the first two and a half centuries after he lived there was enormous disagreement about what the 'Jesus thing' actually meant – much more so, it seems, than between different Church denominations in modern times. The original stories of Jesus were spoken in Aramaic, then translated and written down 30 or 40 years later in Greek, then copied again and again by scribes over many decades. Then there are the various vernacular translations. The earliest fragments of the gospels that survive date from two centuries after the time of Jesus. So what can I make of all that?

First I should say that, for me, the 'Jesus thing' is not my main route to the 'God thing' nor even the 'Christ thing' so I'm not writing here about those things. I see Jesus as a hugely significant prophet. It is clear from a reading of the Gospels that Jesus considered himself part of an important tradition traceable back to ancient times through the Hebrew scriptures. The New Testament is completely entwined in the Old. The writers of the gospels were Jews, who revered the scriptures, but were also soaked in Greek culture like the majority of educated people. Perhaps they saw Jesus partly in the wisdom tradition of the ancient Greek philosophers, notably Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and the various schools following. That tradition was all about encouraging people to examine their lives, living in communities of friends, turning old concepts around, using dialogue rather than direct teaching, and basically just 'shaking things up'. They were witty and charismatic, and often found themselves standing against the authorities.

That certainly sounds like Jesus, who talked of a Kingdom which can be reached through a transformation of our perceptions. The legacy of the philosophers down the ages was always to dislodge older ways of thought, with their followers afterwards trying to make sense of it all, and different schools arising ... and so it went with Jesus. As it happens, there was a revival of the philosophy of the Cynics at the time of Jesus. The Cynics were a bit like wandering preachers, living in poverty, condemning the false values of the status quo, and railing against the injustice of the authorities. That also sounds a bit like Jesus, and he would surely have been aware of the Cynics.

However, Jesus was a Jew, not a Greek, and the gospels do not tell us that he intended to found a whole new religion separate from Judaism. Being baptised by John the Baptist, he stands very firmly in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, who opposed the temple blood

sacrifices, recommended non-violence, lived simply, rejecting material values, inclined towards abstinence from meat and alcohol, and opposed the ritual and hierarchy of the temple. Jesus did all of this, following the Hebrew prophets 'In the Way'. Additionally, with the Greek influence, he is described in the gospels as something of a Greek Hero, half-God-half-man, as well as all of the above! Whether or not Jesus was cast by himself or by the gospel writers as the longed for Messiah is a point which is often discussed.

An important element in this, for me, is vegetarianism. Though the stories show him capable of enjoying hospitality, Jesus basically followed a rule of poverty. In 1st century Galilee the food of the poor was a very spare vegan diet of grains, with the addition of 'relishes' such as lentils, olives, onions and salt ⁱ. Paul's writings are the earliest we have about Jesus and though Paul never knew Jesus, he knew and worked alongside Jesus' contemporary followers. In Romans 14 Paul is in conflict with a group of the original followers of Jesus, including Jesus' brother James, who all thought that vegetarianism should be a *requirement* of the followers of Jesus. This relatively obscure scripture is for me a revelation – for if Jesus himself had eaten meat, meat eating would be accepted as a matter of course for his followers, and the argument would never have arisen! ⁱⁱ

Vegetarianism, simple living, sharing, non-violence... all this was banished to monastic communities when Christianity was regulated and Romanised, starting with Constantine in the 4th century. It is ironic that Jesus, who was depicted as a thorn in the side of authority, ended up with a Roman name as opposed to a version of his Hebrew name, Yeshua.

For me, until the age of about seven, Jesus was a far away magical figure who only appeared for an hour or so each week in Sunday School. After that I simply could not accept things like the miracles, rising from the dead, the virgin birth etc. - not to mention the idea of a unique son of God, and, also outrageous, the Atonement. For me these days, Jesus is no more alive than, say, Shakespeare or Elvis, and I certainly don't think that he was crucified for my sins. When I refer to the scriptures I don't do so because I think the thing actually happened or that someone called Jesus actually said the thing, but because it is valid in its own right and has become part of a centuries old tradition, a kind of folk lore, which is disappearing as we speak, but which continues to fascinate us. And because the stories and hymns which I dismissed in childhood are embedded in me through sheer repetition and by the glorious language of the King James Bible.

It's decades since it bothered me whether the scriptures were actually 'true' or not but I am still drawn to the stories like a puzzle which I can't put down and which will take a lifetime to solve. I try to follow the impossible teachings of Jesus as I understand them, as told in the Gospels, because they are embedded in the literature and cultural tradition where I belong, and for two other main reasons:

- Because Jesus, albeit inadvertently, founded the first religion which disallowed animal sacrifice (a practice even now common in many cultures) and this may prove to have been an important step towards extending the circle of human compassion ⁱⁱⁱ
- And because, as well as himself being a disciple following in The Way of the philosophers and prophets, he had an amazing new emphasis: Love and Forgiveness, acted out. Forgiveness of oneself and others. These were not really new ideas but they seem to be fundamental for a peaceful society. They may be found in the other world religions too, but not necessarily so prominently as to be recorded as the founder's last words, and the centre of his daily prayer.

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as at August 2015

- i McGowan, 1999: *Ascetic Eucharists*.
- ii Veganism, for those who choose it now, is not a penance or a limitation, but simply the adoption of the appropriate food of primates such as ourselves – a healthy plant based diet. It thus helps us to live in harmony with, and do least damage to, the 'natural order' of the environment, which I think of as the Divine Plan. The inevitable horrors of livestock farming *including* dairy and egg production, *including* organic (especially on a scale to feed the huge and fast growing numbers of people now alive) can surely not be part of the 'new community of all creation' that Ashram members are pledged to work for.
- iii Albert Schweitzer, *Kulturphilosophie* (1923): 'Until he extends the circle of compassion to all living things, man will not himself find peace'

(For this exercise we were asked to write 2 sides of A4, so I make no apology for the length of my contribution!)