



The Dogma Wags The Tale

The Pope isn't really looking for the Jesus of History

Jesus of Nazareth

Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI)

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In an address at St Andrews on The Terrace, Wellington, in 2006, Don Cupitt opened by drawing our attention to "... a conflict between two ways of thinking — two ways to truth. The Victorians called it the conflict between dogma and criticism. We call it the conflict between fundamentalism and liberalism."

Earlier, in 2001, he wrote: "... we are products of the Reformation. The crucial point is that it has been shown that religion can be criticised and reformed; and, if that is so, then anything else can be criticised and reformed. For us, the individual may be right *contra mundum*, against the world. Nothing is sacrosanct. Tradition is dead. As Marx commented, the criticism of religion is the basis for all criticism; once the legitimacy of critical thinking had been demonstrated, the project of modernity was launched."

Cupitt invites us to take one of two positions in regard to the claims made, implicitly or explicitly, by formalised paths of faith or "religions". We can either sit *within* the complex of claims being made and judge the world outside in the light of those claims, or we can set those claims within the web of current and emerging knowledge so that what we take to be the case is a coherent amalgam of the best of current human thought. The first option is "dogmatic certainty" where truth is stabilized, by decree. The second option is "critical thinking" by which, as Cupitt has observed more than once, is "the current state of the debate."

Pope Benedict XVI, using his pre-papal name of Joseph Ratzinger, has written a book with the title *Jesus of Nazareth*. It is the first of a planned two, with this volume bearing the subtitle "From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration".

Though presented as a work of scholarship it does not operate within current norms of academic scholarship. For example, the author quotes the works of theologians familiar to him and in agreement with his position, he does not acknowledge the vast body of work on this subject from before Schweitzer up and through The Jesus Seminar. Far from debating with such scholars, he quotes the words of a Russian short-story writer Vladimir Soloviev, to denounce them *en masse*: "The fact is that scriptural exegesis can become a tool of the Antichrist. Soloviev is not the first person to tell us that; it is the deepest point of the temptation story itself. The alleged findings of scholarly exegesis have been used to put together the most dreadful books that destroy the figure of Jesus and dismantle the faith." (p35).



The Pope prefers “canonical exegesis” to “historical critical exegesis”. A Peruvian seminary student, Ignazio de Vega, offered this definition: “Canonical exegesis uses all of the critical, factual armature of ordinary exegesis, but it uses them in the assumption that ‘a voice greater than man’s’ ... speaks through the whole of the Bible, uniting the individual books and turning their apparent incongruities and contradictions into matters of faith, of unity.”

Geza Vermes, writing in *The Times* May 19, 2007, said of the Pope’s book: "In the absence of a stringent linguistic, literary and historical analysis of the Gospels, especially of their many contradictory statements, the identification [of ‘the Jesus of History’ with ‘the Christ of Faith’] is without foundation. One must declare groundless Benedict’s appeal to “canonical exegesis”, an exercise in biblical theology whereby any text from the Old or the New Testament can serve to explain any other biblical text. Such an approach to biblical studies would force back Catholic Bible experts, already the objects of frequent papal disapproval in Jesus of Nazareth, to a pre-Copernican stage of history. "

Gerd Lüdemann, in his critique of this book (*Das Jesusbild des Papstes*, Springe: zu Klampen Verlag, 2007, 157 pp.) points out (p120) that the Pope offers “no convincing arguments against the scholarly consensus that the Johannine discourses have nothing to do with what Jesus himself actually said” ... [I]t is baffling to hear Benedict assert that “[t]he Jesus of the Fourth Gospel and the Jesus of the Synoptics is one and the same: the true ‘historical’ Jesus”.

This then is not a scholar’s book, nor a theologian’s. If theology can be thought of (in Anslem’s words) as “faith seeking understanding” then that quest is thwarted by the pre-emptive process of canonical exegesis — the dogma shapes the findings. There is no ‘seeking’, because seeking is inherently open-ended as to what is found. There are no un-doctrinal challenges to past interpretations because the canonically-approved answers determine which questions are legitimate.

Exegesis: the critical interpretation of the biblical text to discover its intended meaning. ... doctrinal and polemical intentions have often influenced interpretive results; a given text may yield a number of very different interpretations according to the exegetical presuppositions and techniques applied to it.

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Who then will benefit from reading this book? We can draw a parallel from John Shelby Spong’s *Jesus for the Non-Religious*. Despite its title, that book would appeal more to the *already* religious, perhaps to Christians with jaded faith, because readers have to know a lot of the Christian story in order to appreciate the many good points that Spong is making. Similarly, Ratzinger’s *Jesus of Nazareth* is intended for the devout Roman Catholic ‘in-group’. With Christianity under attack from many quarters and some of the incoming missiles hitting targets, the strategic choice of the current Pope appears to be to tighten the Roman Catholic brand-image by brushing aside the liberal and critical analyses of, scholars (especially non-Catholic) and to boldly assert a literary integrity to the scriptures which they certainly do not have. He does this even to the extent of anchoring his argument in the



Gospel of John, that which is farthest in time and concern from what we can glean to have been the concerns of the objectively 'real' Jesus.

The Catholic Modernist, Joseph Loisy, gets a passing mention on page 48 with his ironic and perhaps sad observation of a century ago: "Jesus came preaching the Kingdom, and what arrived was the Church". We see this most strongly in the Kingdom-focussed Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke when contrasted with the Jesus of John's Gospel who would deny entry to those who would seek the Kingdom other than through him.

Rather than a scholarly work, *Jesus of Nazareth* is instead a 374-page sermon. Seen from within the Roman Catholic cultus, it all hangs together. But apply post-Enlightenment critiques and 'all its varying rainbows die away'.

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