

The Human Jesus (1)

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Jesus' Transfiguration on Mount Hermon, his agony in the garden of Gethsemane and his prearranged ordeal on the cross at Calvary in the service of a ritualistic dream - a dream of perfect freedom for the human spirit.

The 'Transfiguration' Theories

Marcello Craveri rejects the traditionally accepted Mount Tabor as an unsuitable location for the Transfiguration of Jesus due to its distance from Caesarea Philippi, the city visited by Jesus and his disciples prior to the event. He points instead to the majestic 8,500 feet high Mount Hermon as a more likely spot due to its close proximity to that city. While noting that mythologists and rationalists have each tried to explain this extraordinary story of glistering light and physical transformation, he rather lamely suggests that one of the three disciples accompanying Jesus may have had a dream which he later related to the others. Michael Grant is similarly not convinced by the storyline of the Transfiguration. Describing the appearance of Moses and Elijah to Peter, James and John as "conjured up" by the Gospel writers, he adds for good measure that the story "contains elements that look like deliberate inventions".¹

In contrast to these writers, John Ferguson follows a slightly unconventional line of Christian reasoning and refers to the Transfiguration of Jesus as a "mystic's ecstasy". He also speaks of the disciples' experience of a brilliant light as a phenomenon well-known in mystical experience.² Holding to the pragmatic line, Craveri visualises Jesus walking ahead of the disciples on some high ledge and being struck by a brilliant ray of sunlight. *Ergo*, the description of his being transfigured by a blinding light from heaven is thrust into a more sensible context. No mysticism here. Yet, something important happened, but it was not the manifestation of divine power. The transfiguring moment for Jesus lay not in his prayers but in his decision to fully inaugurate the Messianic Age by undergoing ritual crucifixion at Jerusalem. That was the key to the whole affair.

Referring to the appearance of Moses and Elijah, Craveri speculates that the appearance of these two Old Testament figures probably signifies the arrival of two Essene monks to encourage Jesus in his pre-planned mission.³ Essenes? Now this way of reading the text will be automatically rejected by Christians, but it may not be as unlikely as it sounds. Luke's Gospel states that there "talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias. Who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish in Jerusalem."⁴ Two men? Accomplish? As the Dead Sea Scroll scholar Barbara Theiring has it that high-ranking Essenes carried, for purposes of ritual, the names of archangels and prophets, Craveri's theory of outsider influence should perhaps be taken seriously. For as now realised on a broad front, our mental portrait of Jesus has been deeply influenced by two thousand years of theological interpretation. As with the meeting between Jesus and Satan in the wilderness, these two men symbolising both the Law and the Prophets are much more likely to have been chosen advisers than either hallucinations, literary inventions or Moses and Elijah visiting Earth from some other dimension. And so too with the men in white robes (referred to as men and angels in different Gospels) seen later at the tomb. Jesus, it seems, was not wholly dependant on his immediate quota of disciples - there were others working with him toward the completion of a Messianic plan. On this basis an alternative meaning can be given to Luke's report on Jesus' countenance being "altered" as he prayed⁵ - it could be said that he was anticipating (as he later did in Gethsemane) what was in store for him at Jerusalem, but on this occasion experienced euphoria instead of fear and despair.

But perhaps the more pertinent observations come from the historian Karen Armstrong. She notes that Jesus was in possession of certain "powers" (*dunamis*), and that he promised these self same powers to his disciples. But only if they had "faith". Faith? Faith in what? Faith in God of course. Jesus was not asking them to believe in theological propositions; he was asking them to "cultivate an inner attitude of surrender and openness to God."⁶ There was not anything he, Jesus, could do, that they would not be able to do if they matched his level of faith and reliance on God -

the powers of the Spirit were for everyone. Western Christians later interpreted the Transfiguration as God's power physically manifested in Jesus, and in line with Jesus' teachings accepted that a robust faith could produce the same powers in believers. Believers? Believers in what? Believers in Jesus as the Son of God come down to earth to save all human beings in all ages from eternal damnation. This is to say that the proposition had changed from faith in God to faith in Jesus, and that faith in Jesus necessitated unerring belief in a rapidly growing theology built around Jesus as God incarnate in human flesh. The teachings of Jesus had been turned on their head.

Not without good reason, however, for in what he said and did Jesus seemed to reveal God's hidden love and concern for human beings, and observers eventually concluded that God had been literally glimpsed in Jesus. Speaking with the authority of a Moses, or an Elijah, this Nazarene had healed the sick and made demons subservient to his will. More importantly, he had accomplished a remarkable deed in Jerusalem, and it was this deed which marked him out as special. Transfigured in his innermost being, he had turned towards Jerusalem, and with a steely resolve consciously submitted himself to trial and crucifixion. Why? To complete Israel's centuries old act of atonement. The ritual of crucifixion followed by a miraculous resurrection would usher in an entirely new covenant with Israel's God.

In Byzantine theology as developed by Maximus the Confessor (580-662 CE), human beings could unite with God. Karen Armstrong notes that this was a quite different approach from the Latins, to whom God "was an optional extra, an alien, external reality tacked on to the human condition."⁷ The Western tradition is described by Armstrong as "eccentric" because of its concern with sin and atonement, rather than with the human condition transfigured in the same sense as Jesus was transfigured - to conceive of God in such an eccentric fashion is to run the risk of making God into an idolatrous object *out there* somewhere. The Eastern Church, on the other hand, did not conceive of transfiguration as an "invasion by a supernatural reality", but as "an enhancement of powers that were natural to humanity."⁸ But it

was necessary for us to open up to God for this natural condition to erupt - we had to surrender to God without reserve. Only then would there be triggered off that transformation and eventual transfiguration of heart and mind and body which Jesus, as an ordinary son of Israel elevated to Messiahship, had eventually experienced.

Now this is a long way off from saying that the disciples saw no more than Jesus lit up by the sun's rays and thought him transfigured; it is in fact to accept the story at face value and suggest, as John Ferguson has done, that Jesus probably did undergo some kind of deep spiritual experience on Mount Hermon. I concur. Something very powerful is going on in this story, and the temptation to sidestep it and see it as a normal event elevated through sleight-of-hand is perhaps to do it a grave injustice. This is not to suggest that the two men who appeared were in fact who they are said to have been - sectarian visitation is the more likely scenario. But as to Jesus having undergone some kind of epiphany as he contemplated what lay ahead of him, that is quite believable. And it is also possible that the surrendering of his will to the will of God was of such intensity that it produced psychic phenomena. Engaged also in a ritualistic encounter with advisers sent to strengthen his resolve, Jesus may well have entered a deep state of contemplation.

Yet it is down to earth in many respects, this strange, light-filled story. And the disciples are obviously extraneous to the event, mere spectators overawed by what is going on - a fact which should not to be overlooked. Peter blurts out something about building tabernacles to Jesus and his two visitors, and the rather stupefied tenor of the statement puts these disciples outside of those who are in the know. So this is not so much a general conversation between Jesus and these sectarians as a set piece of theatre driven by Scripture and fuelled by emotion. It was a plan carefully executed down to the last detail; a plan which would even include the lending of a donkey to Jesus when he arrived at Jerusalem, and the hiring of a room by a helper not of his immediate group. Facts such as these cannot be easily explained; nor should they be overlooked. They are clear indications that Jesus was the central pivot in a politico-religious movement.

Transfigured in body and mind he may well have been, but the very intensity of spirit which triggered off such an experience was allied to a purpose distinctly political as well as deeply religious. At the end of the day he was not only Israel's priestly Messiah, he was also *in potentia* Israel's Messianic king.

The Humanity of Jesus

To appreciate what happened to Jesus on Mount Hermon, we must first fully appreciate that Jesus was in every respect a human being. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that this was the case. He had grown up like any other child in Palestine. He was flesh and blood. If he cut himself, he bled. He could get angry, thirsty, hungry or tired. He was fully human in every respect; and in spite of rumour, his birth had been like any other birth. Both his mother and father were known to the disciples, and the family of Jesus was proud of the physical lineage which connected Jesus to the Davidic Kings through his father's line. This is to say what we all know but keep on forgetting - that Jesus was a human being in every sense.

In fact he was so human that the New Testament cannot avoid recording that fact, and on one occasion reveals this human being at the end of his psychological tether. Sweating drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane as he contemplates the horrors of crucifixion, he shows himself not only capable of fear and despair, but in a few words places himself in a sensible context in relation to Israel's God. This is not God praying to himself, or some inexplicable bit of God talking to some other bit; it is a man fully conscious of his own inadequacy bending his will to what he believes to be a divine purpose. In this sense, the term "Son of man" is not some clever allusion to veiled divinity, it is exactly what it seems to be, a reference to the fact that Jesus was *of* humanity in the fullest possible sense. And the term "Son of God" should not be wrenched out of its original Jewish context and made into a literalism - such a title pointed only to his nearness to God, to the indisputable fact that he had surrendered more of his will to God than others of his generation. In his challenging book *Jesus and the Tide of Time*, John Ferguson quotes Bethune-Baker: "it

was not that the Son of God came down from heaven, but that the Son of man ascended up on high."⁹ That, I think, perfectly captures the situation. Jesus was not God reaching down to man, but man reaching up to God. Perhaps this is the lost meaning of the Ascension story - he managed, finally, to make his will totally subservient to the will of God.

And what a will he had. No ordinary will here. No buckling at the knees through superstition or fear to the religious mumbo-jumbo of his day, just a stark rejection of Judaism's sillier aspects and a constant searching for that perfect balance of love and determination to know the will of God at first hand. In this sense an autonomous will, a will and mind perceptually unshackled from ingrained religious patterns. And not just for the sake of being different. Not just a rebel. Not just an anarchist. A man of sensibility and passion whose capacity to reason was in the service of a grand dream - a dream of perfect freedom for the human spirit. His was not a dream of perfection. No, what he was after was a stripping away of stuffy nonsense. Not a repeat performance of the Law turned manic in some other guise. No, what he was after was a stripping away of stuffiness, not a thicker application of it to human affairs. He had seen through the sectarian game and wanted no part in any madcap adventure against the Romans. It was not the Pharisees he was against, it was the nationalists that drove him to a spitting anger. Yes, the Temple was in need of a good cleansing, but it was these narrow-minded sectarians with their interminable restrictions on thought and behaviour that were the real problem - they thought they were going to initiate the Kingdom of God on Earth, but what they were in fact about to initiate was the greatest disaster in Israel's history.

The experience on Mount Hermon was a turning point for Jesus. Before leaving Casaerea Philippi he seems to have experienced uncertainty of intention, hence his question to Peter: "Whom say men that I am?" It is almost as if he needs reassurance. But when that reassurance comes, he is unnerved; Messiahship is suddenly too much to contemplate - he tells his disciples to keep their mouths shut. Locked away in the safety of his mind the idea of being Israel's Messiah was a manageable concept; but voiced aloud it took on the tenor of a mind deranged by unseemly

spiritual ambition. How could anyone claim such a thing and hope to be taken seriously? It was one thing to silently contemplate such a possibility; it was quite another to articulate it for others to hear. Yet that was his conviction, and there was no avoiding the consequences. He was Israel's Messiah; he was certain of that now. And others were just as certain. His disciples had suspected it ever since the arrest of John the Baptist, and his rejection of Nazarene sectarianism seemed to point to a higher realisation of spiritual truth.

To imagine for one moment that Jesus thought of himself as God incarnate in human flesh is to push his experience of himself and God beyond the limits of conceptual decency - and that in spite of indications in the New Testament that his name carried a divine connotation. Son of God he certainly was, but not God's son in the literal sense. The whole of Israel was God's *firstborn* son (Exodus.4: 22), the adopted son of God, and Jesus too, because of his obedience to God beyond the restrictions of man-made religion, was also an adopted son of God in this limited sense. He was the Messiah, and as the Messiah was automatically termed "Son of God" by way of messianic, archetypal definition.

This fact is clearly seen in Matthew 16: 16 where Peter, in response to Jesus' question, says "You are the Messiah, the Son of God." And again in Matthew 26: 63 when the high priest challenges Jesus with the words: "I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Messiah, the Son of God." On both occasions the word "Christ" is used in Matthew's Gospel, but this is merely the Greek word for "Messiah", and has no connotation other than that. What is of importance here is the secondary title "Son of God" tacked on to "Messiah". That is the give-away. The eventual accusation of blasphemy directed at Jesus by the high priest was not because he claimed to be God's son, it was because he claimed to be the *Messiah of Israel*, a claim soundly rejected by Israel's religious leaders in relation to this Nazarene leader. Yes, one man would eventually die for the people, but in religious parlance this meant only that Jesus would be sacrificed in relation to a ritualistic dream in which his brother James and the Jerusalem Nazarenes had no part. Totally innocent of harbouring insurgent values, Jesus become the nation's ritualised scapegoat,

not by dint of circumstance and association alone, but as part of a planned exercise. This is not to say that he was somehow God dying for the sins of the world, but rather for the sins of the Jewish nation. Facing the excruciating ordeal of death on a Roman cross as part of his particular sect's spiritual imaginings (there was more than one form of Nazarenism), he became, in his group's eyes, the long-awaited archetypal Son of God who would deliver the whole nation from Rome's tyrannical yoke without engaging in military conflict.

Contradictions & Contrasts

The highly informal quality of Jesus' approach to religious observance is striking, particularly when it is weighed against the intensity of his spiritual life. How could he balance the two when such intensity was generally backed by rigorist opinions and nationalistic tendencies? How could he stop himself from closing off instead of opening up when his whole background was infused with doctrinal fixity? Yet open up he continually did, find the balance he managed to do - and that in spite of the fact that he was a sectarian leader schooled in the aspiration of a Galilean sect with a long and complicated history. Holding views plainly at odds with orthodox Judaism, austere Essenism and the strict Pharisee-aligned Nazarenism of his brother James, Jesus created a hybrid religious philosophy which in the early days angered his family and further split the two Nazarene parties. And it may even be feasible to suggest that he had a considerable following of dissident Essenes at his disposal. As it is thought likely that substantial numbers of Essenes helped swell the ranks of James' Nazarene party, it does not strain the imagination to suggest that Jesus too must have attracted liberal-minded Essenes into his camp.

Christian scholars will balk at such a suggestion, but the tendency to keep the Essenes away from Jesus at all costs is now recognised by consensus scholars as untenable. In fact the Herodian party, which is a shadowy presence in the background of the Gospels, is thought to have been the Essenes by another name; and it is also thought likely that Jesus' stinging criticism of

the Pharisees was in fact aimed at this very group. The basic story of Jesus has been tampered with, its focus changed, and an uncritical acceptance of that story as it now stands in the New Testament betrays a gullibility based on fear and superstition. If we are to move on in our understanding of Jesus, in our appreciation of his mentality and purpose, we have to learn to accommodate the uncomfortable fact that Jesus was a fallible human being, a Jewish sectarian in possession of a grand vision which failed. The Kingdom of God did not appear as expected. The Roman Empire did not vanish in a puff of smoke. The nation of Israel was not heralded throughout the Gentile world as God's chosen people. There was just the carnage of total war, the destruction of everything ever hoped for, the realisation that rabid nationalism *and* eschatological dreaming was in the end worth nothing at all. Ideological fixity, however handled, must always disappoint.

From the information available about Jesus in the New Testament, and from the studies of thinkers on both sides of the scholarly divide, it seems probable that this Nazarene was bound ideologically, and for purposes ultimately obscure, to the idea of undergoing the trauma of crucifixion. Not by chance that he underwent arrest and trial - his arrest was stage-managed to the last detail. The Kingdom of God did not miraculously materialise, just the Roman's as usual. The plan failed. The attempts of men to manipulate God, failed. Nationalism unravelled Israel and split the Nazarene party into disparate groups. And so the Zealots and the Nazarenes and the Christians were cursed and banned from the synagogues, and the Jews, scattered to the four winds, began to consolidate wherever possible. All was confusion, a scrambling to adjust doctrinal notions, a splitting of groups already splintered and a falling away of Paul's Christians in the East prior to the Roman invasion of Judea. And afterwards, with Paul and Peter and Jesus dead, there was a polarising of opinion about Jesus among those who still considered him important. Accepted still as the legitimate Messiah of Israel by the Nazarenes and Ebionites, this remarkable man's status was heightened by the Christians at Rome until he eventually matched the sun god Sol Invictus. Later rejected by the Mandeian-Nazarenes as a betrayer of secrets, he

was progressively spiritualised by Gnostic Christians until the whole emphasis was laid on inner knowledge rather than stale doctrine. The Kingdom was about to take on an inner, rather than an outer reality.

But as he knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane and poured out his heart to God, there was no notion of any of this in Jesus' mind, nor of the grand fiasco he was involved in. Without doubt he was a Godly man capable of intense self-scrutiny; a sophisticated man with a set of complex beliefs allied to culture and religious training; an insightful man capable of breaking out and away from the narrow fundamentalism of his day; and a courageous man willing to confront prejudice and religious xenophobia wherever he found it. But when all is said and done, he was a man caught up in the grand imaginings of a religious sect which, due to a twist of history, was to finally subjugate the Roman Empire and don her mantle by other means. Jesus' personal relationship to God would later be bent in a blasphemous direction by those who adapted Paul's complex theological notions to their own purpose, there being little understanding left of what lay at the heart of Jesus' message. As the juggernaut of Roman Christianity gathered momentum and the first layers of theological speculation hardened into dogma, the Galilean Messiah was transmuted into a paragon of virtue, into God himself, his family's sectarian beliefs transposed from orthodoxy to heterodoxy with a stroke of the pen. History was turned on its ear and religious sensibility corkscrewed. Intellectual honesty was made into an elaborate game of subterfuge and Jesus the Galilean, the Nazarene, the man to whom self-deception was abhorrent, was transformed into the greatest deception of all time. Yet he was unaware that any of this would happen as he knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane. Like the rest of us, he was a man of his time carrying the failings of his time.

In the apocryphal Acts of Peter so beloved of the Gnostics, Peter speaks in guarded tones of what he witnessed on Mount Hermon. In fact he is so careful that all he can say is *Talem eum vidi qualem capere potui*. Which translates as "I saw him in such a form as I was able to take in."¹⁰ Writing of this incident, and of those very words, Henry Corbin terms such an experience "theophanic"

(the visible manifestation of God to man), and goes on to give further examples of people seeing forms of God *appropriate to their capacity*. Carrying this concept further, Corbin speaks of perception possessing “a personal character”, and of the field of vision as defined by the “dimension of being . . . common to this or that group”.¹¹ Following suit, Origen, the great Alexandrian Father, speaks of those who witnessed the Transfiguration of Jesus as experiencing it “according as each man was worthy”.

In relation to this, I would like to suggest that there are three ways in which we can approach the story of the Transfiguration: (1) as a completely natural event during which Jesus was caught in a stream of sunlight and thought to have been Transfigured by supernatural means; (2) as a literal event during which he emanated divine light from his body because he was intrinsically divine; and (3) as a moment of deep contemplation during which he was, in some outward sense, Transfigured as a result of reaching out towards his God. My own choice is the latter. Why? Because as Karen Armstrong so succinctly says in relation to this story, “Jesus’ glorified humanity showed us the deified human condition to which we could all aspire.”¹² That, to my way of thinking, is the more sensible approach - and that in spite of the fact that Malachi Martin would see it as the “Winsome Doctrine” (a secular excuse carrying an occult dimension) again raising its ugly head. Yes, we see the Transfiguration of Jesus in different ways, and the way in which we see it determines our capacity for freedom. Question is, freedom from what, exactly?

Back to the Kingdom of God

It seems strange that a man as intelligent as Jesus did not realise that the Jewish dream of a physical Kingdom of God on earth was a utopian hope incapable of fulfillment. But as Hugh Schonfield has shown in *The Passover Plot*, Jesus was a man of his time relying on a blueprint of Messiahship gleaned from the prophetic books. Splicing past history onto the present (the persecution of the Teacher of Righteousness and much else), the contents of these strange documents were made to live again. And so the fortunes of the Elect were mapped, and the Scriptures made to divulge the

exact character and course of his mission. However we explain away the non-appearance of the Kingdom of God, the facts are that Jesus believed in it, the multiple sectarian groups believed in it, and orthodox Jewry believed in it. Jesus even taught his disciples a prayer to that effect, and was obviously convinced that a spiritual transformation of the physical world was part of the Messianic sequence. In the twinkling of an eye all would be changed. The lamb would lie down with the lion. Weapons would be reshaped into useful tools. Israel's heroic dead would be physically raised. But only if he, Jesus, enacted the drama of the Suffering Servant. The whole Messianic package was a drama which had to be played out in the real world.

And so too for the wilderness sectarians. Patterning their daily behaviour on what they thought was a fair representation of how this Kingdom would function, they lived austere, Law-driven lives devoted to interminable rituals of cleanliness. Atonement was of the people on behalf of the people through prayer and rituals meticulously enacted by a priestly elite. Orthodox Jews, on the other hand, were less strict in their observance of the Law and relied on animal sacrifice to wash away the sins of the nation. So ingrained was the practice of ritual slaughter that it continued in the Temple right up until 70. By way of contrast, Jesus seems to have rejected Temple practice, abhorred Qumranite exclusiveness, and advocated an open-ended attitude to the Law which broke with Jewish Orthodoxy and strict Nazarene policy. Offering an almost casual forgiveness for sins, this upstart of a Messiah methodically "carried out certain actions calculated to have particular effect". So says Schonfield; and warming to his subject he adds, "It is as if he (Jesus) was a chemist in a laboratory confidently following a formula set down in an authoritative textbook."¹³ The question is: Which text book? How to break away from the rituals of cleanliness and purity to such an extent and still expect the Kingdom of God to materialise? Or was it just by way of reaction to Essene rigour that Jesus ended up making human beings more important than rote observance? Might it be that Jesus' interaction with Essene thought was at base a reaction against ideas he himself had once held?

In *History and Eschatology*, Rudolf Bultman sets the context for rigorist beliefs by noting that Israel's Old Covenant with God was grounded in a historical event (Moses and the Law), whereas the New Covenant between God and the Christians was grounded in the concept of history's end. For the Christians, the game of history had completed itself in the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and glorification of the "Christ". All that was left was a sweeping up operation before the Messiah reappeared in triumph. Theologically, Christians were not part of history, they were an eschatological event in their own right - they *were* the end-time. The new aeon was imminent. The Kingdom of God was just around the corner. God was about to wind up the whole messy business of human society and inaugurate a theocratic state with the New Israel (the Christians) in charge. But it did not happen. The Son of Man did not appear in clouds of glory. History continued and Christianity fell back into it like a stone into a pond.

However, all this was only after a period of euphoria, a period of certainty during which Christians and orthodox Nazarenes fully expected God to make his move. Bultman observes that the expectation that the end-time had been reached runs through most of the New Testament. In Paul's opinion the night is far spent, the day is at hand (Rom. 13: 12). For Peter "The end of all things is at hand" (I Peter 4: 7). And the writer of Revelation is equally sure that "The time is near" (Rev. 1: 3; 22: 10). Israel's history had reached its goal; it was about to be consummated in a time of troubles. And so Christianity slowly became a new religion - it had no option - and Paul's intricate theology of Messiahship and the end-time began to corkscrew in the face of unfulfilled promises. Laying the emphasis more and more on the nature of the Messiah obedience to the will of God, Paul's Jesus began to inflate towards theological disaster - that is, Jesus the messenger ended up as the message.

Buried in this fiasco of a turn-around by Paul was a perception of things not only centred on Jesus, but most probably belonging to Jesus himself. As Bultman points out in relation to Paul, "the demands of God are summed up in the commandment of love, that is, in a commandment which does not consist in formulated statements".¹⁴ It was life that mattered. It was

encounters with one's fellow human beings that mattered. Love did not grow out of doctrine; it grew out of people interacting. Now such a notion had not appeared in Paul's mind by magic, it appeared, I think, because he had an insider's grasp of Jesus the Nazarene's cast of mind in relation to an alternative form of Nazarene sectarianism. That is in fact his declaration. The Nazarene party under Jesus' brother James was still boxed in by orthodox notions, the separatist Pharisees were similarly closed off, and the rigorist isolationism of the Qumarite Essenes remained intact. When dealing with the daily grind of life and relationship, Paul's teachings so closely reflected Jesus' teachings that we can only marvel at the idea of these two men never having met - an opinion held by scholars in spite of the fact that Paul presents himself to the Nazarene Council as a "Jesus-appointed" Apostle and was not laughed out of court.

Jesus' expectations were the expectations of those around him. At a time in Israel's history when everyone was under eschatological pressure, he had responded on behalf of his people, fulfilled the conditions of Messiahship and inadvertently transformed himself in the process. Or, to again quote Karen Armstrong's description of Jesus after his experience on Mount Hermon, his "glorified humanity showed us the deified human condition to which we could all aspire."¹⁵

Paul was convinced that Jesus' life and teachings heralded a perfect freedom; but he seems not to have anticipated the appearance of a Church using the name of Christ to enslave rather than set free. Jesus the man of flesh and blood and untoward opinions was eventually turned into a phantom, into a mirage upholding the Roman Church's every wish, and as a mirage in its own right, that Church offered its apparently substantial services to a world in need. John Baldock, author of *The Alternative Gospel*, puts it best: "there can be little doubt that in turning Jesus himself into the message the Church has led the Westernised world into a spiritual desert, in which it (the Church) is more of a mirage than the oasis it holds itself to be."¹⁶ Turning Jesus into a spiritual head-locking device, this organisation of self-appointed authority figures began systematically to fit this device to all and sundry, and the result was entrapment in doctrinal imaginings of ever

sturdier formation. Jesus was God. His mother had undergone an immaculate conception and remained a virgin after given birth to God in the shape of a human being. This being, Jesus, could walk on water and make withered limbs reappear as if by magic. He could make the blind see, raise the dead and detect fish under water. In fact there was absolutely nothing he could not do - he was the most powerful being ever to have appeared on earth. And you had better believe it, for if you did not believe it, then you would burn in hell for all eternity.

The Outer and the Inner

Such was the tenor of the early centuries of Christianity's growth towards might and power, and things have not changed much. Jesus is still being peddled as God squeezed into a human body, and Mary is now Queen of Heaven as well as Virgin Mother of God on earth. The head-locking device is still worn by believers, and the fight to retain the Church's traditional values and attitudes is a fight engaged in every day by those who interpret the modern world as bound by Satan and firmly in the grip of his grotesque minions. There is a heaven and there is a hell, there is bliss and there is damnation, and those who say something different are not only deluded, but unwittingly in the pay of diabolical forces. However the world may appear on the surface, *that* is the underlying reality, and Churchmen who go along with the 'winsome doctrine' are anathema before God.

This is of course to say that *anyone* who questions Christianity's traditional doctrines is heading for the flames. I, the author of this book, am heading for the flames. As are you, the reader, if you have ceased to believe in the old fashioned way. In fact it is better never to have believed, never to have heard the name of Jesus than to have heard it and dismissed it; or worst still, have fallen away from it into apathy or willful rejection. Or, as Paul put it, once you have heard the Jesus story you have no cloak for your sin. In spite of it being the twenty-first century, this kind of thinking remains evident at the highest levels of Catholic Christianity. And many Anglicans and Presbyterians are quite in accord with such an approach. Evangelicals and Fundamentalists

of all hues are well-known for their stand on these issues, and there's many a fence-sitter in each of those categories who, when under pressure, tend to back the highly vocal conservative minority for fear of undermining Christianity as an institution. Now not all Christians are so reticent, but the Catholic hierarchy is bound to the old doctrines for reasons of continuity, and simple believers, "disinformed, deformed, and infantilised by two thousand years of the Church's fairy-tale preaching" cannot, as the theologian/historian Uta Ranke Heinemann states, bear the insights that are available to them.

Conservatives consider all the basic doctrines of early Christianity sacrosanct. But if there is a particular doctrine held dear by such stalwarts of the Faith, then it is the doctrine of Christ atoning death on the cross. Without that doctrine Christianity is as nothing. So what a pity that it makes no sense at all, this business of a Jewish man in his mid-thirties functioning as a human sacrifice - it is as blatantly inadequate a vision today as it was when Jesus himself mistakenly attempted to make it the cornerstone of his Messianic vision. Yes, mistaken; he was a human being and he made mistakes just like the rest of us. The only difference between him and the rest of us being that he believed himself to be the Messiah of Israel, God's archetypal Son chosen and called and supported by angelic forces, so the mistakes, when they came, tended to be of some proportion. And the mistakes of the Church which picked up on his basic mistake have been similarly impressive. But only because they misunderstood what he was up to - they thought he was trying to save the whole world off his own bat, when he was in fact attempting to single-handedly initiate the close-down sequence of his age.

It was Jesus' hope to cancel Israel's debt of sin and waywardness before God through a ritualistic act, and also to offer the Gentile world shelter in Israel's about-to-be-revealed theocracy. That's what he was up to. And as an operation planned and executed with military precision it seemed incapable of failing. But it did fail. It failed utterly to impress Israel's God; and that in spite of the fact that it had taken every ounce of courage and faith this remarkable man possessed. The age continued; time

was not annulled. The Romans came instead of the Kingdom and Israel was beaten into the ground. So what went wrong? Why did this God-centred man fail in his extraordinary mission? Well, there's really only one answer to such a question, and it isn't very nice - religious naivety. As a man of his times Jesus was heavily influenced by sectarian ideas, and these ideas let him down. Yet in every other way he was well ahead of his time. He was reformer. He challenged the accepted religious practises of both Jewish orthodoxy and severely denounced the extremes of sectarian narrow-mindedness. He healed when he was not supposed to heal. He forgave sins and invited censure. He broke the laws of the Sabbath and spoke of that holy day being made for the people, not the people for it. He had untoward views on just about every level of religious thought, and he hated equally the tendency of the Temple priesthood to turn Judaism's sacrificial procedures into a gigantic commercial transaction. He was, in effect, the new broom that sweeps clean, but he miscalculated - God, he discovered, is, when all is said and done, inscrutable.

An Inhuman Theology

Elaine Pagels and Uta Ranke-Heinemann have each contributed much of importance to the subject of Jesus, and to the problem of the cross. Pagels has opened our eyes to the importance of Christian Gnosticism, and Ranke-Heinemann has challenged us with her dismantling of Christian doctrine. Reminding us that Christianity during the first few centuries was an "illegal sect whose members increasingly reflected the diverse interests of an ever more complex population",¹⁷ Pagels notes that after the Church's elevation to the level of imperial institution in the fourth century, Christian teaching changed from being a celebration of human freedom to one where universal bondage to sin became the central, preoccupying focus. In her turn, Uta Ranke-Heineman attacks the Catholic Church's preoccupation with suffering and points to its inhuman theology of the cross as the root of this spiritual malady.

Now the very fact that early Christianity was not preoccupied with sin and suffering suggests a view of the cross

and its purpose not quite the same as that held by the later Church. So what happened? Where did the optimism go? The joy? The exuberance? The freedom? Why, and how, did the theology of the cross change? Ranke-Heinemann is aware of its baleful effect on human affairs. She writes of a theology which "built substructures under and superstructures over" Jesus' crucifixion, and speaks of a "frozen theology" and a "petrified dogmatic edifice". Quoting the Viennese historian Fredrich Heer, she reveals that both Goethe and Shiller saw Christians as "cruel enemies of life, as venerators of the cross, unhinged by the spasms of penitence".¹⁸ Her own opinion is that the theology of the cross has probably not assisted human beings towards humane action, but actually helped promote our inhumanity to each another down the centuries. Her book, *Putting Away Childish Things*, ends on this sobering note, and Pagels is not far behind with a similar condemnation. In *Adam, Eve & the Serpent*, she talks of the Christian view of freedom changing when Christianity became the religion of the emperors. And then she pinpoints the cause of it all - Augustine. It is Augustine who read into the message of Jesus, Paul and the Genesis story his "theory of original sin."¹⁹ Becoming the dominant influence in western Christianity, Augustine's rank pessimism about human nature was to infiltrate and destroy the "freedoms" enjoyed earlier by Paul's churches - the rule of Law was back in place.

And yet Karen Armstrong can write in *The First Christian* that Paul's Christianity "became a religion far more concerned with sin, with eternal life, with mystical dying in the death of Jesus and the attainment of freedom from the fetters of sin and death."²⁰ So was Augustine really to blame? Or do we have a scrambled view of Paul's teachings because an Augustine-type view of things was later added to the Epistles? There are definitely two Paul's in the New Testament, and one of them is undoubtedly a fake. How else can we explain the Epistles bearing Paul's name that were never written by him? Paul number one is bright, hopeful, respects women and sounds like Jesus (as one would expect); Paul number two is darkly obsessed with sin and dislikes women. Paul number one is relaxed about the Law; Paul number two virtually reinvents the Law. So what is going on? Has someone been tampering with

Paul's image; or is it simply that Paul lost sight of his original vision and turned conservative? That is a possibility. It might just be that with the failure of Jesus' expectations concerning the Kingdom that he began to rationalise previous hopes into a new shape. Karen Armstrong notes that he eventually takes Christianity right out of the world altogether,²¹ and that could suggest a shift in perception.

What is going on here can perhaps be detected in the fact that the Gospels reflect Pauline opinion - the question is: Which Paul? Armstrong notes that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is not concerned with earthly necessities; but that may only reflect additions made to Paul's thinking. If this is the case, then the Jesus who seems utterly disinterested in earthly things may also be a fake, a figure sculpted in hindsight by Christians so ensconced *in* time that escape *out of time* became their obsession. The Kingdom on earth had not arrived, so the emphasis was placed on a heavenly Kingdom, and finally on heaven alone. Jesus' mistake has now vanished without trace; it has been transposed onto a new ethereal key which many rank-and-file Christians will refine through exhaustive experiment - Gnosticism is up and running

The problem, so it seems, was that the Church at Rome turned into an earthly, imperial institution selling a heavenly kingdom modelled on an earthly kingdom while at the same time consolidating an earthly kingdom for themselves. If you see what I mean. And so the Gnostic Christians (rank and file Christians with little interest in hierarchies) became sandwiched between what the Church had to sell, and what she wanted to be - a glorious earthly reflection of a heavenly ideal. Allow these Gnostic Christians too much freedom and they would undermine the earthly authority of those selling that heavenly ideal.

The point is this: Jesus did not ascend into this heavenly ideal after his resurrection, he stayed on earth and hung around waiting for the Kingdom to abruptly happen - it did not happen and he ended up dead and was buried like everyone else. But he made his mark in spite of this blip in his expectations; in fact he single-handedly revolutionised religious thinking and set in motion a search which carried Nazarenes *and* Christians into the depths of their own hearts and minds. The Zealots, backed by

sectarian fanaticism, were to bait the Romans until they were forced to respond, but with the destruction of Jerusalem and the breakdown of the fabric of Jewish life these hardliners were jettisoned by many sectarians in favour of the inner journey. The Kingdom was now "within", had in many respects always been within, and it would now grow downwards into the human psyche with astonishing results. Creating highly complex symbolic schemes to disguise what was going on, Christian Gnostics would explore the inner world with a contagious enthusiasm, and Nazarene-affiliated groups would follow a similar pattern. Hence the curious fact that so many of the Jewish sectarian groups can be traced back to the Nazarenes (Ebionites, Ophites, Mandeans, etc), and the equally curious fact that these Nazarenes expound a Jesus story utterly different from the by now well-established Church at Rome. But so too is the Jesus story of the Gnostic Christians different, and as they are probably all that's left of Paul's scattered flock, the anomalous nature of the situation becomes self-evident.

Rank and file Christians for whom, doctrinally, the transfiguration of the self eventually took precedence over the sufferings of the cross were dubbed "Gnostic" by the Roman Church, and as it is likely that all Christians carried this title, the inference to be drawn is that "knowledge" in the sense of deep spiritual experience had been part of an earlier program now made subservient to dry dogma. As an insult, the term "Gnostic" is therefore a reverse flip - it denotes a Church which has lost sight of its own spiritual base. Intransigent to a fault, this hierarchy of self-appointed authority figures inadvertently draws attention to the fact that the kind of gnosis they accuse rank-and-file Christians of exercising is in fact the very type of *gnosis* they themselves are promoting - a rational *gnosis* allied to fixed doctrinal notions.

The True Church

In *The Gnostic Gospels* Elaine Pagels prides open the Gnostic world and confronts us with a mentality quite other than the one expected. Revealing what she terms "the other side of the coin", she draws our attention to the fact that not only did orthodox

Christianity denounce the Gnostics, the Gnostics denounced the orthodox as "unknowingly empty, not knowing who they are, like dumb animals."²² Accusing orthodox Christians of having built an "imitation church", these Gnostics then elaborate fully on their grievances and voice the opinion that the Church at Rome has enslaved its flock through fear and forced it to obey earthly representatives. The Roman Church is also referred to as a counterfeit church that claims exclusive legitimacy, and those who lead it described as blind because they speak of things about which they know nothing. This is their principle failing, and out of their arrogance springs the notion of doctrines which cannot be questioned by anyone. Oppressing their flock, the hierarchy of this Church is described as slandering the truth and preaching a false Christ.

Elaine Pagels captures the essence of the problem when she tells us that by the end of the second century orthodoxy had established objective criteria for church membership. She writes: "Whoever confessed the Creed, accepted the ritual of baptism, participated in worship, and obeyed the clergy was accepted as a fellow Christian."²³ The beating heart of the Christian faith had been lost, and into the vacuum created had poured man-made doctrines backed by emotional investment. And so there rose confusion in many a Christian mind as to who was telling the truth about Jesus, and with the help of a central authority complete with ever-extending powers, the Roman Church eventually managed to foist their doctrinal creations on the Christian mind. That is the basic story, and it is hotly refuted to this day by a Church hierarchy which refuses to consider the claims of these Gnostics as viable on any level. But the truth will out - modern scholarship has blown the lid off this particular pot, and feeble attempts by Church-oriented scholars to put that lid back on again have failed. Gnostic Christians set up qualitative criteria and looked for evidence of spiritual maturity in those claiming to be Christian. In contrast to this approach, the bishops did away with qualitative criteria and attempted to unify the scattered churches through standardisation of doctrine. It was no longer what you experienced in your own depths that mattered; all that matter was what you believed with your mind. And do not

try to have the best of both worlds: if you belonged to an orthodox church and were foolish enough to hold a cult meal or baptise someone without the bishop being present, then not only had you separated yourself from the legitimate Church, you had also separated yourself from God.²⁴

So the Gospels of the Gnostics were banned, and along with the suppression of these curious gospels went the suppression of those who understand their message. Full of symbols and veiled language concerning interior processes, these Gospels were either hidden by initiates so that their insights might survive, or destroyed by those who found those insights incomprehensible and threatening. Classified by Irenaeus as apostate, and therefore worse than pagans, the Gnostic Christians were described as evil seducers and hounded from pillar to post. And what was the reason for this harassment? Because they claimed, in their Christian maturity, to be able to discriminate for themselves between what was true and what was false. They did not need to be told what to believe, they said. They did not require the advice of waterless canals (the bishops); and neither did they need doctrines which bound the mind to fixed paths of thought. Their Christianity was founded not on beliefs, but on relationship, their behaviour not on the dictates of authority figures, but on the presence of God in their midst. The rule of faith had displaced conscience and made the arbitrary notions of men sacrosanct. How could anyone awake to the Spirit of Truth accept such nonsense as God-directed?

It was the educated Christians who divorced themselves from the Roman Church. Tertullian complained that it was the cream of his membership who deserted the ship of faith for the ship of understanding. And as discussed earlier, the word "understanding" should not be interpreted as referring to a desire for knowledge in the intellectual sense - that is a false accusation made against the Gnostic Christians by their doctrinally hide-bound bishops. *Gnosis* was not "hard knowledge", it was deep insight into the things of the spirit. The human mind was backgrounded by archetypal energies, and the release of those energies automatically cleared perception of its dependence on

external forms. This was the heart of their secret Gospel, and it was also the heart of Jesus' Gospel.

This carries us back to the fact that Jesus was himself a nonconformist in religious terms. So it is no surprise that those who took his basic teachings seriously were also nonconformists, that they could stand neither the restrictions nor the claustrophobia of religious narrow-mindedness. And that is exactly how the Church ended up, as a narrow-minded, short-sighted and altogether pompous institution. And it hasn't changed much. Oh yes, it has modernised its image to some extent, but only because it had no option - the world was streaking away from it and its foolishness was becoming self-evident. Now Paul may have considered the cleverness of the world foolishness, and the foolishness of Christian belief a mark of intelligence, but if he had lived for a few hundred years he would have rapidly changed his tune. For in spite of evidence in the Epistles of Paul to the contrary, I do not think he believed what the Roman Church ended up believing; in fact I think he would have been affronted by Catholic doctrine as it eventually evolved. Paul has been blamed over and over again for writing the Roman Church a doctrinal blank cheque, but a careful comparison of the Epistles suggests doctrinal skulduggery right from the very beginning. There is a phantom Jesus in the Gospels, and there is a phantom Paul in the Epistles, and we would do well to carefully study their separate profiles.

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