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Jesus of Nazareth: Son of God, Wise Teacher...or Impostor?

The following is a talk presented by Donald Hatch at the April 13th meeting of the Humanist Association of London and Area. Those who were not at the meeting may enjoy reading it.

My talk will center on the second and third chapters of my book *The Road Not Travelled*. These chapters are entitled *The Evolution of Christianity* and *The Search for the Historical Jesus*. But before getting into the contents of these chapters, a brief explanation of the two themes present in the book is in order. The first theme is about two roads, the Athenian and the Jerusalem. Considering the Athenian road first, great things were happening in Athens around the year 400 BCE, where a prosperous democratic and basically secular society flourished. Later the Romans adapted many, although not all, of the Athenian attributes. Like in Athens, there was no state religion in Rome and morality was in the domain of the philosophers rather than being the dictates of any church. Unfortunately, this condition came to an end after Roman Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire in the early 4th century CE. Regrettably, Western society left the Athenian road behind and adopted the Jerusalem road, which was then actively and successfully promoted by the Catholic Church for one thousand years. But after the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment, Western societies began to get back on the Athenian road as democracy as well as science and technology developed, particularly in Protestant countries. It is my contention put forth in the book that now is the time for the West to get fully back on the Athenian road, promoting the desirability of secular societies with a minimum of religiosity, as they now exist in Scandinavia.

The second theme in the book concerns Jesus of Nazareth. What was he really like and why is understanding his true origin so important? It is important because this man, Jesus, has influenced Western societies more than any other person, and he is the main reason the West left the Athenian road and embarked on the Jerusalem road, slowing progress for at least a thousand years. This is why the subtitle to my book is: *How the democracy, science and humanism of the Greeks was suppressed by the early Christian Church and how that obstructed the progress of humanity*.

I had the misfortune of being raised in the Baptist Church where, as a teenager, I started to have grave doubts about what I was being asked to believe. Many of these beliefs made little sense to me, but I set the doubts aside while I obtained an education, started a family and became absorbed in my career. But after retirement 26 years ago, the doubts returned and I had time to think about and explore these

matters. I started to read extensively on the happenings that occurred in the eastern Mediterranean area during the thousand years between 500 BCE and 500 CE. I also read the four Gospels, trying to make some sense out of the man known as Jesus of Nazareth. No matter how often I read these Gospels, because of their ambiguity and contradictions, I could not arrive at any firm conclusion. Admittedly, some of the words attributed to Jesus contain wisdom and good advice on moral and ethical living, but you have to cherry pick the Gospels, as many Christians do, to make Jesus out to be a paragon of virtue and a person worthy of emulation.

So what did I find in my readings, and what did I conclude? Was Jesus, as Christians claim, a supernatural entity, born of a virgin, the son of God, crucified and buried, risen from the grave, sitting in heaven at the right hand of God, destined to return at some future date to establish God's kingdom on earth? Or, was he fully human and none of the above? Let's explore!

Although there are few non-biblical references to Jesus, I do believe a human Jesus of Nazareth actually did exist, but not as the supernatural Jesus-the-Christ of the Gospels. Instead, I believe a clever, fully human Jesus of Nazareth founded a cult with a few Jewish followers, roamed the countryside around Nazareth claiming to be the promised Messiah, preached a message of salvation, and in doing so aggravated the Jewish leaders in the Temple who persuaded the Roman authorities to have him crucified and buried. I do not believe he rose from the grave nor ascended into heaven.

Most scholars who attempt to determine what Jesus was really like look mainly to the Gospels and the Epistles, because there is little else to go on. And they nearly always try to portray Jesus in a positive manner as a uniquely virtuous individual. But there are always two sides to every story. The other side is that of the Jews, and there we get a much different picture. The Jews believed Jesus was an impostor, who claimed to be the Messiah promised in their scripture. The majority of Jews obviously agreed he was an impostor because, after the death of Jesus, his followers were unable to attract many other Jews to the Jesus movement and this group of followers eventually died out. (It was left to the apostle Paul and his associates to successfully promote a Christianity based on a supernatural Jesus-the-Christ throughout parts of the Roman Empire. And the rest, as they say, is history). More on this later!

And there is much more to be learned from the Jews, because there are references to Jesus in the Babylonian Talmud and in other writings where it is claimed Jesus was illegitimate, with his mother being a harlot named Miriam and his father being a Roman soldier, an archer named Panthera. Records show Panthera was transferred to Germany in 9 CE where his grave was discovered during railway construction in 1859. According to his tombstone, he died at age 62. And there is more. The Talmud states Jesus studied in a Yeshiva to become a rabbi, but was expelled for sexual misdemeanors. It is most likely that Jesus did study to be a rabbi, because it is clear from the Gospels that he was very knowledgeable about the Hebrew Scriptures.

So how credible is the scenario described above? I believe it is more credible that the Christian scenario involving a supernatural Jesus-the-Christ. Nevertheless, it is the supernatural scenario that survived throughout the dark ages and until the 17th century, when doubts began to appear.

After the Protestant Reformation and during the Enlightenment, various scholars began to question the validity of traditional Jewish and Christian beliefs. One of the earliest was the Dutch Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza, who rejected belief in a supernatural God and thought of God as the natural laws and

forces of nature. Another doubter was the Scottish philosopher David Hume. In France, there was the philosophe Baron d'Holbach, who anonymously published a short treatise entitled *Christianity Unveiled* in 1761, and in Germany, the Deist philosopher Herman Samuel Reimarus authored *The Aims of Jesus and His Disciples*, in which he called Christianity a fraud and reasoned that the Gospel of John should not be taken seriously.

And there was King Frederick the Great of Prussia who aspired to be, among many other things, a Platonic philosopher king like the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. To Frederick, "Christianity was stuffed with miracles, contradictions and absurdities, was spawned in the fevered imaginations of the Orientals and then spread to Europe, where some fanatics espoused it, some intriguers pretended to be convinced by it, and some imbeciles actually believed it." In the nineteenth century the German theologian and author David Friedrich Strauss published *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* in 1835-36, questioning many of the traditional Christian beliefs. The works of Strauss and other German scholars are well documented in Albert Schweitzer's book *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, published in 1906. Being a recent graduate in theology, Schweitzer set out to disprove Reimarus' conclusions, but after studying the works of various nineteenth century German philosophers, particularly those of David Friedrich Strauss, he concluded that Reimarus was right: "The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the kingdom of God, who founded the kingdom of heaven upon earth, and died to give his work final consecration, never existed." Albert Schweitzer was one of the most remarkable multi-talented men who ever lived. Perhaps best known for his work as a medical missionary at Lambaréné in what is now Gabon, he was also an accomplished organist, a theologian and a philosopher. He was astute enough to realize that the supernatural Jesus-the-Christ portrayed in the Gospels could not possibly have been a reality. He did, however, believe that the human Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish prophet, did in fact exist early in the first century CE.

After the publication of Schweitzer's book, there was not a lot of interest in exploring the nature of the historical Jesus until the latter part of the twentieth century. In that era, a number of books were published by various scholars and liberal theologians suggesting that it was time for a fresh evaluation of the man who has had such a profound influence on the course of Western history. Among them were Bishop John Robinson, Don Cupitt and A.C. Grayling in the U.K., Lloyd Geering in New Zealand, Bishop John Shelby Spong and Marcus Borg in the United States, and Tom Harpur and Gretta Vosper in Canada. And there were also the Jesus Seminar people in California, including co-founders Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan. In general, they all concluded that Jesus was a fully human Jewish teacher who was not born of a virgin, and not bodily resurrected. They also reasoned that the Bible was a human construct rather than the divine word of God. Some did not believe in God or an afterlife, while others hedged on these issues. On the other hand, they all appeared to believe that Jesus was a compassionate teacher with a credible ethical and moral message, and that he was a role model worthy of emulation. This has been the conventional wisdom, but this depiction of Jesus is being challenged, particularly now that the English-speaking world is aware of the *Testament* of Jean Meslier (1664-1729).

Meslier was a French curate who composed his *Testament* outlining his radical views on Christianity and the Catholic Church over a ten-year period ending in 1728, a year before his death. We are now most fortunate that in 2009, Paris translator Michael Shreve published Meslier's *Testament* in English in its entirety for the first time. Meslier did not want to become a priest, but became one to please his parents. Once inside the priesthood, he saw the spuriousness of the Catholic faith and beliefs and also observed the corruption therein. He was well versed in the classics as well as the Bible, and over a

period of ten years he prepared his *Testament* that was, understandably, not to be published until after his death. In it, Meslier dismisses the incarnation right away by stating that Jesus was just a man, a mortal man like other men. He then calls Jesus low born, a wretched fanatic, and a host of other derogatory terms. He describes Jesus as a lunatic who imagined he was the son of God, born to deliver the Jews from captivity, become king of the Jews and after death would return to rule over God's Kingdom eternally on earth, where justice would reside. Meslier says the visions and wild thoughts of the famous fanatic Don Quixote were never as crazy as those of Jesus. He calls Jesus mentally deranged because he so vainly imagined and predicted many great and beautiful things that never happened. Regarding the teaching of Jesus, he explains that he feels "safe in saying that even the fables of Aesop are certainly more ingenious and instructive than all those crude and low parables that are told in the Gospels."

Meslier claims that in the beginning, Christianity was considered to be nothing but madness, a vile and despicable fanaticism. He mentions, too, that in the early days of Christianity there was a saying in Italy that, "you have to be crazy to be a Christian." Meslier averred that there was no God, and no heaven or hell, and that the Catholic Church was corrupt and fraudulent. Meslier's assertions may well be overstated, but he forces us to consider at least that Jesus may not have been the paragon of virtue commonly accepted in Christian circles.

If one analyzes the synoptic Gospels from Meslier's perspective and eliminates all aspects of the supernatural, including God, angels, Satan (the devil), demons, miracles, heaven, a virgin birth and a physical resurrection, there is very little left of Christianity. There are the sayings of Jesus, some inspirational, some containing wisdom and some contradictory. There are also the somewhat confusing Beatitudes, the Golden Rule (that did not originate with Jesus) and the parables, a few of which make little sense. So how is it that Christianity became so well established? Well, there are enough good things in the synoptic Gospels and the Epistles to persuade believers to view Jesus as a unique paragon of virtue and a role model worthy of admiration. Providing one ignores the contradictions and the ambiguities, by cherry-picking the Gospels, as many Christians do, it is not difficult to portray Jesus as a saintly and wise teacher.

So we now come to the question: How did Jesus of Nazareth morph into the fictitious Jesus-the-Christ? For me, the best explanation is that Jesus of Nazareth must have been an incredible promoter. He appears to have been remarkably successful at convincing a relatively small number of Jewish people to believe he possessed supernatural powers. In the same way that evangelical preachers have always been able, and still are able, to gull people by the thousands to believe in a message of salvation and eternal life, Jesus of Nazareth was able to sway the disciples, and enough other followers to believe his message, and also believe that he was indeed the promised Messiah possessing the power of redemption. Then after his death, the apostle Paul and others successfully promoted Jesus' message throughout parts of the Roman Empire.

All this, I believe, leads to the conclusion that Jesus-the-Christ, the supernatural being revered and worshipped by devout Christians, was a fiction concocted by the human Jesus of Nazareth himself! Then, this Jesus-the-Christ was further embellished at the Council of Nicaea, in 325 CE, when he was declared to be the centerpiece of the Holy Trinity, the invented enigma consisting of the father, son and holy spirit. Also aiding in the embellishment at this time was the issuance of the Nicene Creed. Considering

the final outcome of his activities, Jesus of Nazareth was one of the greatest salespersons or self-promoters of all time.

My final question is: can one credibly regard, as both Reimarus and Meslier did, the Christian religion as a fraud? I would argue that one certainly can. If both the supernatural Judeo-Christian God and the supernatural Jesus-the-Christ are fictional entities, as we have outlined, it follows that the religion based on such delusions or misrepresentations cannot be regarded as anything but fraudulent.

Naturally, there will be those who challenge my conclusions about Jesus being an impostor and contend that it would be impossible for an impostor to have been the inspiration for the founding of the most populous religion on earth. Some will even call my conclusions blasphemous. But such charges are not difficult to dismiss because impostors founding religious cults and sects are not all that rare. In our own times, we have seen the likes of Jim Jones' People's Temple Agricultural Project in Guyana, and David Koresh's Branch Dividians in Waco Texas, create religious cults. These two impostors and many of their followers perished in bloodshed, but not all such delusional enterprises come to a dramatic bad end. Some, like Christianity and Mormonism flourish, and demonstrate that there always seems to be a significant number of people in the world willing to accept outlandish beliefs.

At last, my quest to uncover the real historical Jesus comes to an end. I spent years searching for an answer that would satisfy my curiosity, but with little satisfaction. Then I realized there had to be two Jesuses, not just one. There was a human Jesus of Nazareth and a fictitious supernatural Jesus-the-Christ who had to be an invention. But who was the inventor? Finally, after learning that Jean Meslier proposed that Jesus of Nazareth was an impostor, eureka! The inventor of Jesus-the-Christ was Jesus of Nazareth himself. My search was over! The conclusions of my investigations are summarized below:

- Since there is not, nor ever has been, an omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent God, capable of answering prayer and controlling events on earth, Jesus of Nazareth cannot possibly have been the supernatural son of a non-existent God. He was fully human.
- Since no fully human person could be born of a virgin, perform miracles, possess the power to forgive sins and rise from the grave, Jesus the supernatural Christ had to be an invention.
- But who was the inventor? It is postulated that the inventor was Jesus of Nazareth himself, who was able to convince a small number of Jews that he was indeed the promised Messiah. Then after his death, this small band was able to convert a few more Jews to the Christian faith.
- Although these Jewish Christians must have believed in Jesus' supernatural powers, the majority of Jews did not, lending credence to the conclusion he was in fact an impostor. Furthermore, to this day Jews do not believe Jesus was the Messiah. The early Jewish Christians were a spectacular failure at converting fellow Jews to their brand of Christianity. They just could not find many naive Jewish converts.
- On the other hand, the apostle Paul and his associates were amazingly successful at converting significant numbers of mainly peasant Gentiles (but not the Roman elite). These early leaders were also great salespersons and promoters, and in spite of hardships and persecutions, were able to establish and maintain a number of Christian churches in the eastern Mediterranean area.
- Then with Constantine's edict, the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, and the formation of the Roman Catholic Church, another formidable promoter, Christianity grew over a couple of

millennia to become the most populous religion on earth, now numbering over two billion members and adherents. Luther's and Calvin's Protestantism also assisted in the proliferation.

- Conclusions: Jesus the supernatural Christ was an invention concocted by Jesus of Nazareth himself, who was fully human and either deluded or a clever impostor or both. Therefore, is it not logical to conclude that Christianity, based on a fictitious Jesus-the-Christ, is a hoax?

All of the foregoing suggests that it is time to move away from outdated religious beliefs and practices, and work toward the establishment of a more secular society based on non-theistic Epicurean humanism. As evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson states in his recent book, *The Social Conquest of Earth*.

“Surely there exist ways to find spiritual fulfillment without surrender and enslavement to religions. With an ethic of simple decency to one another, the unrelenting application of reason, and acceptance of what we truly are, our dreams will finally come home to stay.”

Finally, I admit my conclusions will certainly not be accepted by many, particularly devout Christians, but they should generate interesting discussion after the break.

Addendum

A lively discussion ensued after the break. One member rightly pointed out that no mention was made about the positive aspects of Christianity. There are two paragraphs in Chapter 3 of the book dealing with this aspect, but were not included in the talk because of time restraints. To provide some balance, these paragraphs are printed below.

Before concluding this Chapter, I want to acknowledge that despite its delusional character, Christianity has made positive contributions to Western society in the past. The beneficial influence of the Protestant Reformation has already been mentioned in Chapter 2. Another attribute often cited is that Christian teachings have been a steady source of moral and ethical instructions for adherents of the Christian faith. Many people have received great comfort from their beliefs and from consoling passages in the Bible, often in times of grief and sadness. It is also a fact that many church members are actively involved in outreach work in both their communities and abroad. Then there are the social benefits of belonging to a community of like-minded people that some will say is the main reason they belong to a church. And the great wealth of Christian music merits special mention. Some of the greatest music ever written was composed for Christian church services. Composers like Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and others, wrote inspiring religious music along with their secular compositions. And there are the many great tunes in the hymnbooks of the mainline churches and the southern gospel music of the U.S. will get your toes tapping.

Along with music, Christianity has also inspired great architectural works. Many churches and monasteries are impressive expressions of religious sentiment as well as monumental buildings. There are also impressive literary works, like Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, that have immensely enriched the literature of the imagination. Last, but not least, there is a magnificent wealth of paintings inspired by the religious sentiments engendered by Christianity. This art is a powerful manifestation of the human spirit, and we are indebted to religion for inspiring such great works.