

Response to Luke Timothy Johnson's *The Real Jesus*

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Since the whole quest discussion has overflowed into the media, I have rummaged around for some catchy way to get my response onto prime time television and the evening news. I have hit upon the brilliant idea to score this fight between the Questers and their Questioners as a *boxing match*. This is especially appropriate in that, as the referee, I will be pretending to be objective, as most biblical scholars do, when I very clearly am on the side of the Questers. So, let the fight begin.

ROUND ONE: Johnson comes out swinging haymakers right and left, and enough land that the Questers are in danger of a TKO. Johnson's opening salvo of punches are mostly below the belt, and the referee has to warn him repeatedly that characterizing his opponents' scholarship as "second-rate," "stuff," "fulminations," "academic self-promotion," "a strange combination of grandiosity and hucksterism," "narcissistic self-referentiality," "pure flimflam," "a paper chase, pure and simple," "a house of cards," "a certain kind of madness," and media "manipulation" is scarcely civil, despite Johnson's pious disclaimer, on the heels of three such insults, that "I hope that my language is courteous" (p. vi). The crowd loves this stuff, and clamors for more; they prefer a street brawl to the more disciplined boxing of the masters. Johnson continues to lodge low blows in later rounds, and even an occasional knee to the groin that has left some Questers in acute pain. When he settles down, however, Johnson scores some solid points by attacking the Questers at their weakest spot: the Jesus Seminar. He lands the following blows:

1. The Jesus Seminar is a self-selected and far from representative group of scholars from "relatively undistinguished academic positions"—none of them from the faculties of Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Duke, Union, Emory, or Chicago.¹ The Jesus Seminar is stocked

1. Johnson is reproducing the comments of Richard B. Hays here ("The Corrected Jesus," *First Things* [May 1994] 43-48), but Hays had not listed Emory among the elite schools. Johnson teaches at Emory. And did he not know that Emory's Vernon K. Robbins was a member of the Jesus Seminar?

with clearly marginal scholars; some have no academic appointment at all. Some are even engaged, for God's sake, in continuing education! Jesus Seminar participants cry foul, but the referee, being overawed by the reference to Harvard and Yale, ignores them. Apparently we are not to look to the margins, but only to the center, for truth. Never mind that this argument excludes places like Marburg, or Nazareth.

2. The Jesus Seminar votes with colored beads on the authenticity of Jesus' sayings and deeds. While the Seminar has never agreed that the burden of proof is on the text to prove its authenticity, the scholarly ethos of "more radical than thou" does tend to have that effect. What Johnson doesn't seem to know, however, is that some of us (yes, it must come out, I am one of those marginal scholars in the Jesus Seminar)—some of us assume that the text is neither authentic nor inauthentic, but must be evaluated with evidence before a judgment can be made either way. Johnson treats the Seminar's votes as monolithic: a gray means that all in the Seminar agree it's gray. In fact, some voted red, some pink, some gray, some black. Borg and Mahlon Smith and I often voted more in the red to pink shades (though we also voted grey and black), while others, believing that texts come to us only through the filter of the church, voted grey or black on everything. (I take it, from what Johnson says about historicity, that he would vote black virtually all the time.) Differences were and remain sharp, but the Seminar maintained a remarkable collegiality throughout, and has been the single most satisfying experience I have ever had with other scholars. Nor can I imagine a higher degree of intellectual engagement and competence than that exhibited by this group, most of whom received their PhDs at the schools listed above. Besides, voting with beads is fun. But it is easy to laugh at the bead game, so Johnson scores a point here even though the referee is heavily influenced by crowd noise.

3. Here comes the blow that almost puts the Jesus Seminar on the deck. Johnson goes through a stack of newspaper clippings about the Seminar, and pulls out the very worst statements by participants (who are not used to being interviewed and often did it badly). As a participant in the Seminar I am frequently embarrassed by what my colleagues say. Several times I have almost quit. But where else can I go to engage in scholarly conversation about texts that is so rich? Yes, it is true that Bob Funk has a double agenda: on the one hand, scholarly evaluation of texts, and on the other, grinding fundamentalism to powder. You need to know that Funk was a boy evangelist, and has been trying to exorcise his past ever since—as several of the rest of you have. And, as Johnson points out, ex-fundamentalists often share the same historical positivism that characterizes fundamentalists.

Those of us not raised fundamentalist sometimes look on in disbelief at the hatred of fundamentalism that some people manifest. As former fundamentalists they need compassion and release from their past. But they also need to recognize that their past contaminates their present in the form of objectivism, rigidity, absolutism, and the demand for proof or certainty. Maybe we need a twelve-step SBL working group for recovering fundamentalists!

Ouch. After a round like that, the referee almost stops the fight. A bit cocky, Johnson moves to his corner, while the wobbly Questers barely can keep their feet. Score it Johnson 3, Questers 0.

ROUND TWO. Emboldened, Johnson comes out swinging. He sets up the round with a series of sucker punches. Beginning with the most egregiously poor examples of the Quest—Barbara Thiering, Bishop John Spong, A. N. Wilson, Stephen Mitchell—he then examines the work of Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, suggesting without guise that Borg and Crossan are no different in kind, only in degree, from these rank amateurs. The referee warns Johnson that this knee in the crotch has cost him points and if repeated will mean forfeiting the match. Johnson settles down then to a fairly routine critique of Borg and Crossan with which many scholars, myself included, would largely agree. I do think Crossan's dependence on the Gospel of Peter is a mistake, and I do believe Borg is wrong to strip Jesus of all eschatological elements. Surely Jesus looked forward to what God would do in the future. Neither scholar explains why Jesus created such implacable hostility that he had to be executed. Their Cynic/Sage depiction is in some ways gutless and too genteel. Without question, Crossan and Borg have not written perfect books. But they are powerful books, in a whole different league than Thiering and Spong.

Borg comments that the research he did into the historical Jesus had the effect of restimulating his faith. Johnson is evidently not pleased that Borg could be spiritually renewed by the Quest. That, we learn later, is the province of the church. Johnson does not want there to be an alternative path to Jesus that those disillusioned with the church can take to find their way back to God. (Johnson saves the more conservative work of John Meier for a later chapter so as not to tar it by association with Thiering and company; but he condemns Meier's quest all the same.) So this round ends with Johnson being docked points, but with no one landing any solid blows.

ROUND THREE. Convinced that jabs at the Questers will never get the job done, Johnson mounts an attack on the Quest itself and its fundamental assumptions. Now we begin to get some serious

boxing. Johnson lifts up six constant traits which he says are common to all Questers, from the worst to the best:

1. To a remarkable extent, he says, Questers reject the canonical Gospels as reliable sources for our knowledge of Jesus. The Questers answer this blow with a left-right combination. They don't hesitate to use every available first century resource to understand the gospels. But the vast majority of their works do involve careful exegesis of traditions in the four gospels. Just because they use non-canonical books does not mean that they reject the gospels. It is true that Funk and others in the Jesus Seminar have raised questions about the value today of a canon, but there is sharp disagreement on that issue. Score one for the Questers.

2. The Questers, says Johnson, shape their portrait of Jesus and their account of Christian origins without reference to other canonical sources such as Acts and Paul. Johnson helpfully lists data about Jesus that come from the epistles, but it doesn't amount to much. Most are statements of barest fact, and some scholars could challenge the facticity of some of these "facts."² But it's true that Questers do tend to underplay these resources. Give him half a point.

3. Questers, says Johnson, portray the mission of Jesus and the Jesus movement in terms of a social or cultural critique rather than in terms of religious or spiritual realities. This is patently not true of Borg, and I don't think it is true of Crossan either. Johnson has a very traditional, privatized, and apolitical notion of what religion is, and doesn't recognize the prophetic dimension of these works even when it is plastered right before his eyes. Score a point for the Questers.

4. The Questers, says Johnson, have a theological agenda in which traditional Christian belief is a distortion of the "real" Jesus. This is true. The Questers want to get behind "Christendom," before Just War theory, before the state establishment of Christianity led it to countenance torture and capital punishment, before the institutionalization of an all-male hierarchy, before Eucharistic theology made Jesus a perpetual sacrifice instead of the end of all sacrificing. Some of these Questers have a passion for justice, and are not afraid to critique the New Testament itself where it yields to domination, patriarchalism, or condemnation of homosexuals. They believe that the spirit of Jesus is recoverable in the gospels, and that we can catch something of that spirit and find our own way following his spirit. They think this can be done even by people outside the church, like Gandhi. Johnson urges, at the end of his book, that the received tradition would best be criticized from *within* the Gospel narratives themselves, rather than by contriving an alternative reconstruction. There

2. Robert J. Miller, "A Response to Luke Johnson's *The Real Jesus*," unpublished manuscript, 11.

are texts within the canon, he says, that are "more than sufficient" to challenge practices unworthy of Jesus, he says. Then why didn't they? There are, it is true, texts that support the view that Jesus had a revolutionary relationship to women, but this recognition did not come from the magisterium of the Roman Catholic church, nor from any Bible-centered Protestant seminary or sect, but from feminists who brought a new perspective to the Bible and saw what no one had seen before. With this new perspective, even some men could see that the evidence was indeed there, hidden in plain sight by a dominant narrative in which women were subordinated to men. All the exegetical skill of all the male scholars poring over these texts for almost two millennia was unable to discern what these feminists helped us finally to see. Even if a Sophiology may not have been the earliest christology, it is still incontrovertible that Jesus' relationships with women in all four gospels are, without exception, a challenge to patriarchal mores. With that right cross, the Questers get off their heels and score a big point.

5. Whether implicit or explicit, the shared premise of these Questers books, says Johnson, is that historical knowledge is normative for faith, and therefore for theology. For the Questers, origins define essence: the first understanding of Jesus was necessarily better than any following; the original form of the Jesus movement was naturally better than any of its developments. But Robert J. Miller sensibly retorts: What if we treat the idea of Jesus' superiority to the church as a considered judgment rather than an a priori assumption? Among the disappointing developments in early Christianity are anti-Semitism and the church's later collaboration with Roman imperial power. Nearly everyone regards these developments as corruptions of what Jesus stood for, Miller argues.³ Those of us who are to varying degrees disillusioned by some developments in the church feel that it is not only our right but our sacred obligation to press behind the church's records to whatever clues remain of Jesus' own message. We claim that the nature of the records make this quest possible, and that the Jesus we encounter is far more radical than the Jesus lifted up in gold leaf in the sanctuaries of our churches. I, for one, want answers to these legitimate and urgent questions:

Before he was worshiped as God incarnate, how did Jesus struggle to incarnate God?

Before he became identified as the source of all healing, how did he relate to, and how did he teach his disciples to relate to the healing Source?

3. *Ibid.*, 13.

Before forgiveness became a function solely of his cross, how did he understand people to have been forgiven?

Before the Kingdom became a compensatory afterlife or a future utopia adorned with all the political trappings that Jesus resolutely rejected, what did he mean by the Kingdom?

Before he became identified as Messiah, how did he relate to the profound meaning in the Messianic hope?⁴

Questers believe these are valid questions, even if they send cold shivers down the spines of those more orthodox. But Questers don't necessarily regard historical knowledge as *normative* for faith. They are, rather, offering faith alternative ways of regarding the received tradition. And these alternatives can be so bracing, so liberating, or so fresh as to evoke, for some, what can only be termed a religious conversion. Big score for the Questers.

6. One final "constant trait" of the Questers: they are, says Johnson, more committed to scholarship than to the church. Church always appears "only as a problem and never as a mystery, always as a tragic mistake and never as a providential development" (56). This is a fair complaint. It is, after all, the church that the Questers attack that has preserved traditions that make such an attack possible. To a high degree, we Questers, being marginal persons, are probably also rebels who are still fighting free of our fathers and our mothers, or at very least Mother Church. Though how Johnson has been able to crawl into the minds of Questers and accurately weigh their relative commitment to church and academy is beyond me. Research would probably show that they spend more time fighting with the academic bureaucracy than criticizing the church. We will give Johnson half a point here.

Whew, it seemed like that round would never end. Score that round 4-1 for the Questers, who are beginning to show some real spunk. Good thing we have an objective referee scoring these rounds! But hold on; Johnson has a punch that the Questers have never been able to handle, ever since it was introduced by Martin Kähler: a fundamental challenge to historiography itself.

4. Critics may charge that questions like these smack of "modernizing." But modernizing is an inevitable concomitant of any historical reconstruction, as William Herzog points out, because researchers cannot escape the conditions of their own time and circumstances. Herzog distinguishes anachronizing from modernizing. Anachronizing is unconscious modernizing, whereas modernizing is done consciously as part of the hermeneutical task. All contemporary readings of Jesus are modernizing readings because they seek to make sense of Jesus in terms of significant modern problems, questions, and meanings (William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994] 30, 38).

ROUND FOUR. Like the Protestant Martin Kähler before him, the Roman Catholic Johnson wants to separate the historiographical Jesus from the kerygmatic Christ. Martin Kähler's book was called *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche biblische Christus*, translated and introduced by Carl Braaten under the title *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*.⁵ Braaten observed that Kähler did not mean by *historische* "what really happened," but historiography. And *geschichtliche* meant "historic." Kähler was not playing the historical off against the kerygmatic, only the historiographical. Kähler would have been horrified, Braaten insists, by the detachment of christology from the actual historical existence of the human being Jesus. The title might have read more accurately, "The so-called Jesus served up by the historiographical work of historians today, and the historic, biblical Christ of Christian tradition." There is no split for Kähler between historicity and faith; both are encompassed in the second half of the clause.

The expression "historical Jesus" is thus innately confusing. It can mean "the actual or real Jesus"; it can mean the Jesus described by historians practicing historiography; it can mean the historic, world changing person Jesus; it can mean that Jesus was really human and not a mythological character; it can mean the human being in whom God was incarnate; and it can mean the pre-resurrection career of the Christ, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. It would help immeasurably if we would make clear which meaning we intend when we use the expression.

I agree with Johnson that the historical critical approach, despite its undeniable contributions, is inadequate as the central or sole means of interpreting Scripture. Here I find myself in profound agreement with Johnson against the prevailing practice of the biblical guild. As W. Taylor Stevenson has noted, the historical approach is basically a *mythic* way of perceiving the world. The idea of history *is* our myth. Devotees of the myth of history affirm that reality is historical in nature, and that reality can only be discerned by use of historical method.⁶ History replaces ontology as the basis for understanding human being.⁷ Only those events that can be established as "historical," as having "really happened," are "true." Only facts have verity.

This myth of history rests on unprovable and indefensible assumptions, however. No other culture in the history of the world has embraced the odd idea that something has to be historical (i.e., "really

5. M. Kahler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (trans. C. Braaten; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964).

6. W. Taylor Stevenson, *History as Myth* (New York: Seabury, 1969) 6.

7. Mary Ellen Trahan, "Historical Relativism and Theological Conceptions of the Self," unpublished manuscript.

happened") in order to be real or true. Indeed, the most important things in life are beyond historiographical analysis. Historiographical investigation cannot, for example, establish whether two people truly love each other, or are acting from the motives they give for their behavior.

In addition, the results of historiographical examination are usually highly debatable, fiercely controverted, unstable, transitory, and paltry in their capacity to provide lessons from the past. Historical criticism has consistently sided with the view that knowledge is obedience to facts, an adaptation to necessity, fidelity to the given. But true fidelity to the wisdom of the past requires, not simple repetition, but a conscious reentering of the creative vortex out of which the text itself was born, and a recasting of its meaning in terms that enable the text to exercise its transformative power today. The belief that knowledge is obedience to facts is a form of literalism, based on a discredited positivism and driven by an abject envy of science. One wonders if some biblical scholars believe in science more than they do in their own capacity for hermeneutically-informed readings. To a shocking degree, biblical studies have conformed to the need to prove to colleagues in the university that it is a serious discipline. The presenting temptation was to pretend it was a science, with a body of assured results based on near universal consent. But no such results exist. Apart from a few general agreements, after 200 years of critical exegesis there is scarcely a conclusion of biblical scholarship that is uncontested. This aping of the hard sciences is pitiful. As early as 1914, the Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev had already identified this attitude as science envy. "It would seem as clear as day," he commented, "that nothing in the world should be scientific except science itself."⁸ Though it preens itself on being scientific, historiography can never go beyond various degrees of probability to achieve actual proof.

Faith is precisely the capacity to live without certitude. We need not ask the texts for absolute knowledge, but only adequate knowledge. We can dispense with complete confidence and settle for sufficient confidence. Total proof gives way to reliable knowledge. After all, to perform even the most complex tasks like driving a car, one need not know more than a few facts about how the motor works. Or as Robert Solow put it, just because no medical operation is perfectly sterile it does not follow that all surgical procedures might as well be conducted in a sewer.⁹

8. Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act* (New York: Harper, 1954) 23.

9. Robert Solow, cited by Mark Wallace, *Fragments of the Spirit* (New York: Continuum, 1996) 17 n. 3.

Faith is not dependent on historiography, but it can certainly be helped by it.¹⁰ Historical criticism can make possible alternative images of Jesus that can free us from oppressive images spawned by a church too often in cahoots with the Domination System. Critical scholarship can help us clarify Jesus' critique of domination. Most important, it permits us to appreciate Jesus without an overlay of dogma that claims absolute truth and negates the value of other approaches to the divine.

I can only agree with Johnson that seminaries attempt to socialize students into a world that is dominated by historiography as the measurer of truth, and that most of what passes for historical criticism is irrelevant to their work as ministers (p. 65). I said as much in 1973 in *The Bible in Human Transformation*, and am glad to report that Black, liberation, and feminist exegetes have made huge strides in overthrowing the positivistic, objectivist paradigm that has ruled, and still rules, the SBL. And while I'm at it, I also agree with Johnson's criticism of scholars for neglecting pedagogy, and with his comments about the impact of the secularization of biblical studies in the American universities.

How shall we score this round? I certainly agree with Johnson, against most of my colleagues in the biblical guild, that historiography has been vastly overrated in its capacity to produce provable results, but I am much more optimistic than he about the capacity of historical critical scholarship to produce useable results. Let's give him two points for his important insights about the limits of historiography, which I share, but one point against him for regarding its efforts as totally devoid of relevance when it comes to faith.

ROUND FIVE. For those of you still ringside, Johnson wants to say more about historicity (meaning here, did Jesus really say it). I find him confusing. When he wants to undermine the Questers, this Questioner challenges all their assumptions. The criterion of dissimilarity cannot be used, he argues, because doing so would require a complete account of Jesus' Jewish context and a complete account of early Christian tradition as a frame against which to measure a specific saying or event, and such data are not available. But that stipulation is only weighty if we ignore the distinction introduced in the last round between absolute truth and adequate truth. Likewise, he insists that the criterion of coherence (if X is so, then other passages

10. Tom Wright, who is as critical of the Jesus Seminary as Johnson, nevertheless thinks that Johnson has thrown out the baby with the bath by abandoning the historical critical approach. "I know," he writes, "that my own understanding of Jesus, and hence of Christianity, has been deeply and profoundly affected by my historical study" (*Who Was Jesus?* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992] ix).

agreeing with X are also) leads to "creeping certitude" and rests on false inferences. Johnson counters with this clever riposte: "If it can be demonstrated with a high degree of probability that sometime in the past I baked a pumpkin pie, it cannot be inferred from this fact that I baked other pumpkin pies" (p. 130). But that is only cogent because we think of Johnson as a biblical scholar. If he were known to the world as "Luke Johnson, Pumpkin Pie Baker," it would be a priori likely that he would have, in fact, baked other pumpkin pies. If Jesus was known as a teacher, healer, exorcist, and controversialist, it is highly probable that he behaved consistently with those roles more than once.

Yet when it comes to his own presentation of how the New Testament should be handled, Johnson's razor grows dull, and we find him asserting, without evidence, that the Book of Acts is a reliable source for the development of early Christianity, and that Mark's narrative outline is trustworthy and holds primacy over John's—again, without citing evidence.

Johnson insists that without a narrative outline (which for him requires blind trust in Mark's) there is no meaning in the isolated events of Jesus' life, even if they can be shown to be probable. This is simply untrue. The words and deeds of Jesus are like holograms, that marvelous laser photography in which the entire photographic image is preserved in any fragment of the negative. Just so, something of the dramatically new reality proclaimed by Jesus is reproduced in even a single act or saying. Despite the complexity of the tradition, his spirit shines through. Or, to shift the image, if from a few bones paleontologists can accurately reconstruct the entire skeleton of a pre-historical animal, then surely we can accurately infer from the New Testament record something authentic about Jesus.¹¹

And Johnson argues that we cannot move from the indicative ("that's the way Jesus was") to the imperative ("therefore this is the way you must believe") (p. 86). He is certainly right that there is no compulsion to make such a move, but we certainly can, and have, done so, as the history of denominations makes abundantly clear. When we see that Jesus most likely did not proclaim himself to be God, that frees us to choose not to declare him to be God. Likewise, discovering that a wing of the Jewish Christian community rejected the virgin birth and the claim that Jesus was Messiah creates a larger ambiance for early Christianity, and helps us see that there were varieties of interpretations of who Jesus was. And that can affect our beliefs about him today, *if we so choose*.

11. Jackson Lee Ice, "What Albert Schweitzer Believed about Jesus," *Christian Century* 102 (January 2-9, 1985) 13.

So how do we score Round Five? One point for Johnson's rigorous critique of historical criteria, and one for the Questers' capacity to function without committing themselves to either Mark or John's narrative structure except where the data justify it. Thus every scholar I know of agrees that the baptism of Jesus took place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and Johnson's arguments against this are a reversion to the demand for a kind of scientific proof that is inadmissible. Sufficient evidence and high probability are all we get and all we need.

ROUND SIX. Johnson has saved up his haymaker for now: the resurrection of Jesus. Here Johnson draws a line across the ring between the dead Jesus and the risen Christ who is alive and present in the church. Christians (as opposed to scholars) don't need the dead Jesus, the Jesus who once lived. If they are lucky enough to belong to the church Johnson does, they experience the risen Christ as present through the Holy Spirit to heal, convert, and transform human life. I applaud this very Methodist emphasis on the reality of the divine in human experience. That, after all, is what the New Testament is about. But I have some knowledge of such charismatic congregations, and I am often struck by their lack of concern about male supremacy, racism, homophobia, or economic injustice. Why, if the Spirit speaks to them in tongues and prophecy, does it not draw their attention to this oversight? By what criteria do we say what is an "identifiably Christian" community (p. 142)? Well, liberation theology, feminist exegesis, and gay rights activists have spelled out some of the criteria, bringing brilliant new exegetical insights to the fore. But Johnson has already put all these "prophets" down as stooges of modernity. So his certainty about what constitutes the gospel makes me nervous, and I would like him to be open to new things the Holy Spirit is saying to the churches.

Johnson makes the excellent point that the people in his congregation believe in the gospel miracle stories because they themselves experience signs and wonders. They have no trouble believing in the resurrection because they experience Jesus as alive in their daily lives. The gospels are religiously true, and no amount of historical mucking around can add to that belief or subtract from it.

Whether Jesus declared himself to be the Messiah during his lifetime is irrelevant; by his resurrection, God has "made him both Lord and Messiah" (Acts 2:36). Whether Jesus predicted the *parousia* is irrelevant; it is because he lives now as powerful Lord that the Church expects him to inaugurate God's final triumph. . . . (p. 142)

But what if a person concludes, through examining the texts, that Jesus himself rejected Messiahship, and spoke of himself rather as

"the human being" ("son of man")? What if one concludes that the "second coming" of Jesus has been perverted, even in the New Testament, into a literalized return from heaven in which Jesus would do all the things he so resolutely refused to do during his lifetime (kill opponents, establish a kingdom, rule all nations as an absolute dictator "with a rod of iron," and so forth)? Of course Christian faith is not based on historical reconstructions of Jesus; but historical reconstructions can free us to reconceive our faith in significant ways. Thus the observation that almost all the references to torture and punishment at the Last Judgment are additions by Matthew where they were lacking in Mark and Luke can help to free a person terrified as a child by Matthew's depictions of eternal punishment for the slightest infractions of the moral code.

Johnson uses a very appealing analogy from Karl Rahner: Jesus is not like a long-dead lover whose short time with us is lovingly remembered. Rather, he is like a lover who continues to live with the beloved in a growing and maturing relationship. In such a bond, what happened in the past forms fond (or distressing) memories, but that love is presently in no way *dependent* on the right interpretation of those earlier experiences (p. 143). Surely this overstates Jesus' presence. The resurrection narratives are also about his absence, and of remembering him "until he comes." Besides, many people have been hurt deeply by their experience of church. For them, the situation is more like a Truth Commission in a former tyranny, which tries to discover what really did happen to people who were "disappeared" by the military. Apart from such knowledge, their families and lovers cannot rest or move into the future. I use such an extreme counter-analogy because Johnson refuses *anywhere* in his book to admit that the churches have committed, and in some cases are still committing, great crimes against humanity.

Apart from those closing salvoes by the Questers, Johnson scores some very strong points in this round. Let's give him three and the Questers one. But Johnson's open appeal to resurrection faith and the present activity of the risen Jesus raises serious questions about whether this entire enterprise, that of Questers and Questioners alike, is not ideologically driven. Can it even be counted as honestly exegetical, if the real interests of all parties are ultimately theological?

ROUND SEVEN. Johnson seems to think that everyone's Jesus is ideologically drawn except his own orthodox Roman Catholic picture. Crossan's Jesus is a peasant Cynic who preaches inclusiveness and equality, which fits perfectly within the "idealized ethos of the late-twentieth-century academic: he is nonpatriarchal and noninsti-

tutional; his kingdom consists of an open table where everyone accepts everyone else" (p. 46). Borg's Jesus is "ultimately platitudinous, the mirror reflection of Borg's own social location in the liberal academy" (p. 43). Of course Johnson's judgment is true; we always project on Jesus our own idealized self-images and social location. But the Questers respond with a stinging left hook: is there anything so insipid, so politically supportive of oppressive regimes, patriarchal power, and economic injustice, as the Jesus of established churches? Johnson doesn't explain how he arrives at his own ideology-free position, but it looks suspiciously like something of which Cardinal Ratzinger might approve.

More is behind the anti-apocalyptic shift of modern biblical scholarship than simply embarrassment. One impetus for the scholarly rejection of apocalyptic comes straight out of the atmosphere of nuclear doom that gripped the world all through the Cold War period. Hal Lindsay, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson actively rooted for Armageddon to hurry up and come, believing that Armageddon "cannot take place in a world that has been disarmed," and that Jesus would come as a military messiah who will wage the war that will end all wars. Jesus' return will be delayed until nuclear holocaust destroys the Soviet Union and two-thirds of all Jews (the surviving Jews will either convert to Christianity or be destroyed).¹² Clergy turned to scholars for help in refuting this horrendous but biblically based apocalypticism. Scholars responded as best they could. But they were little prepared by training or inclination to engage in an exegetical bar room brawl. So they returned to the sources. The Jesus sanitized of apocalyptic elements was one result.

I am not engaging in sociological reductionism here. Cultural anxiety was only one factor. The non-apocalyptic Jesus had been around since C. H. Dodd, and there were compelling arguments that could be marshalled on its behalf. But the sociological element was there as a constant pressure. The mainline churches cried out for help, and scholars responded as best they could, not by debating with the Christian right, but by a total reconception of the very presentation of the gospel.

In the same way, the generation following World War II in Germany unconsciously tried to deal with German guilt for that war by reiterating tirelessly the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, even though it is a fairly minor theme in the New Testament, mentioned explicitly only in a few Pauline and post-Pauline epistles.

12. Source: John M. Swomley, "Fundamentalist Opposition to World Peace," *Fellowship* 62 (July/August 1996) 13-14.

That message sold well in its Bultmannian, existentialist form in America, with our highly individualistic view of religion and our pathological preoccupation with guilt. Of course post-war German theology was more than simply a reaction to guilt, but that guilt was real. I do wish they could have just admitted their guilt instead of going on and on about justification, as if by sheer reiteration they could rub the slate clean. But my point here is that this *pastoral* function of exegesis was appropriate, though the source of its necessity needed to be raised to consciousness. But that is true of all ideological readings—and there are *only* ideological readings—they all need to be raised to consciousness, and usually it is our opponents who are best able to heal our own ideological blindness. But it seems to be taking forever for the biblical guild to acknowledge that disinterested, "objective" scholarship is a mirage.

Johnson's own ideological stake in this debate must be obvious to everyone but himself. It should be as clear as the ink on a scholar's cuff that you only attack in order to defend something, and that "something" is Christianity as he knows it—the Christianity of his own Roman Catholic church. This is perfectly appropriate; in fact, I found it refreshing to see someone openly stating his passionate commitment in a scholarly debate. But Johnson surely knows better than to think that he alone among scholars is non-ideological, when he manifests so openly his own commitment.

In the face of Falwell and company, Johnson has a very secure refuge: the magisterium of the Roman church. Those of us who are Protestants are in a real bind, however. We are forced to argue from the Bible against a position that is deeply grounded in the Bible. The mainline churches needed arguments that could *defeat* the apocalypticism of a James Watt, President Reagan's Interior Secretary, who believed that the world was coming to an end in his generation, so why waste time and money on conservation? And that meant defeating that whole way of looking at the Bible. Since the Book of Revelation and Paul were clearly ammunition for the right, what else could they do but to turn to Jesus as the origin and source and try to reconceive a Christianity that will be ecologically sensitive, nonviolent, and just—not, for heaven's sake, in order to be respectable in the face of modernity, but in order to prevent Christianity from contributing to the demise of the planet. So I find it a bit ungenerous of Johnson to say that Crossan and Borg are merely playing to the media (who is he to talk with all *his* talk-show appearances!). On the contrary, they are engaged in a thoroughgoing attempt to "save" Jesus from the clutches of the religious right. Of course their attempt fails to do justice to Jesus; every attempt must. But that is no grounds for condemnation; the goal, to paraphrase Rilke, is to be defeated, deci-

sively, by constantly greater attempts. Let us then celebrate their failures as among the greatest of our time.

Score that round Questers 3, Johnson 0. That makes them fairly even overall. This fight is far from over, and I have no idea whether it is billed as a ten rounder or a fifteen rounder or what. One thing is clear: it's a fight worth watching. We can do without the low blows, we can learn to be more courteous and collegial, but basically this is good clean fun. The issues are serious, but we need not take ourselves so seriously. Though I think you had better get a more objective scorer.