

Response to Criticism of *The Real Jesus*

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I wrote *The Real Jesus* as someone who has participated in critical New Testament scholarship for some thirty years and who is committed to the Christian faith, if not as a description of my character at least as the symbolic world in which I find it impossible not to dwell.

The book tries to do three basic things: first, to demystify claims made by or for some strands of current historical Jesus publications; second, to disentangle some of the cultural contexts enabling such claims to flourish; third, to raise questions concerning the study of Christianity and the ways of knowing—specifically, the limits of historical knowing, and the legitimacy of other ways of knowing, especially religious and literary. I will elaborate each briefly by way of introduction.

1. Demystification. The proliferation of books challenging traditional beliefs from those claiming to be scholars has had two effects. On those who still think scholars are in the truth business, announcements in the media that Jesus did not say or do what the Gospels attribute to him the effect is confusion: has the Jesus of the church been discredited? On those—far too many—who already think the life of the mind and the life of faith incompatible, the effect is confirmation: careless declarations by scholars confirm what had been suspected all along, namely that scholarship erodes faith. The already disastrous chasm between critical intelligence and faith has been extended.

In this situation, I thought (and still think) it important to show the limits of such claims, not in the name of faith but in the name of science. I tried to show that the claimants by no means represented all scholars, and that on the grounds of the most disinterested science, their historiographical practice had serious deficiencies. My only regret in this regard is that I may have given the impression that I opposed only one form of historical Jesus research (that carried out in the style of the Jesus Seminar, Borg and Crossan), and that I might

find the sort purveyed by Wright and Sanders (for example) more congenial. In fact, however, I have as much problem with the attempt to read the historical Jesus directly off the pages of the Gospels (as though there *were* no critical problems) as I do with the attempt to discover the historical Jesus by abandoning the Gospel narratives.

2. Disentangling the Cultural Context. The media "end run" of the Jesus Seminar and other publications reveals the erosion of boundaries in the cultural institutions of the church and academy as places where meaningful and disciplined discussion on the identity of Jesus can take place on the grounds, respectively, of strict scientific methodologies (uncorrupted by cultural agendas), and of faithful reflection (uncorrupted by the double-mindedness of modernity). There ought to be something profoundly disturbing about Jesus becoming, like Madonna or Michael Jackson, a personality to be debated at the level of the lowest common intellectual quotient and spiritual investment.

3. Questions concerning the Ways of Knowing. I raise a number of questions concerning the relationship between history and reality, reality and the ways of knowing. Rapidly:

a. We can know some things historically about Jesus and about Christian origins. We are not totally ignorant, especially about basic patterns of activity.

b. Going beyond the intractable limits of the evidence, however, means the distortion both of the subject matter and of the methods employed.

c. History, even at its best, is not necessarily normative for religious commitment. Faith—itself a way of knowing, after all—involves history as only one of its components.

d. In the case of Christianity, faith is rooted in the resurrection of Jesus, understood not as resuscitation, but as a continuing, transcendent and transforming power in the "body of Christ" that is the church. This is the experience and conviction that measures the "real Jesus" for classical Christian faith.

e. Finally, the dismantling of the Gospel narratives as narratives not only does *not* get us closer to a "historical Jesus," but runs the risk of obfuscating the character of Jesus that is found in those narratives and that lies at the heart of Christian theology.

RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR ADELA YARBRO COLLINS

I appreciate the clarity and crispness of Professor Collins' critique, as well as her courtesy in providing me a copy in plenty of time to think about my response. On p. 228, she refers to the "odd exclusion" from my view of critical scholarship of "critical history." I must take this as a misreading of my position. Chapters four and five of my book

show both the limits and the *possibilities* of historical knowledge concerning Christian origins and Jesus. Because I do not subscribe to the distortions of method that today sometimes pass as history does not mean that I reject the value of historical inquiry. On the contrary, I see my position as a defense of the best sort of critical historiography.

Professor Collins expresses fear (p. 229) that my position suggests "imposing a loyalty oath" on professors in seminaries. As she says, "Only those willing to make a commitment to the Christian tradition should teach in them." My response to this is, well . . . yes. I do not find it odd that those preparing persons for Christian ministry should profess loyalty to the Christian tradition. The language of "imposition," of course, suggests something sinister. But I would hope that the Nicene Creed, let us say, or the Apostle's Creed at least, might gladly be embraced by a professor of New Testament in a seminary with no imposition required. She adds that this would be in tension with the ideal of a neutral university system and a strong tradition of academic freedom. I leave others to debate the present condition of academic freedom in the university, but I do want to point out that Professor Collins finds no difficulty with *this* form of allegiance to a tradition which is required for the institution of the university to fulfill its identity. By no means, however, are all seminaries located within universities—the vast majority of them are not. And even those that are should not have too great a difficulty reconciling a broad loyalty to a tradition with criticism of it. Schools of medicine are not expected to be neutral on the question of anatomy, nor schools of law on the value of studying contracts.

Along the same lines, Professor Collins advocates (p. 4) letting "diverse voices" be heard in seminaries: "the freedom to hear every kind of voice will allow them to discover their own." She must have a fundamentally different perception than I do of the confused state of students presently in seminaries on the rudiments of Christian doctrine and practice. I see our students in critical need of basic catechesis. For such students, being drawn along by every casual opinion in the supermarket of ideas does not represent a liberation but only a more subtle enslavement. I fail to see why, within a tradition, the deepest sort of commitment and the most rigorous criticism might not be connected as correlative rather than opposed as irreconcilable contraries.

On the question of "History and Truth" (pp. 230-32), Professor Collins wants to distinguish between gaps in knowledge that are filled in by imagination, and the affirmation of 'truths' that are declared to be "*beyond the realm of historical investigation*" (p. 231, italics mine). She is clearly in favor of the first rather than the second. But I think it important to assert as forcefully as possible the legitimacy,

indeed the necessity, of declaring that there are truths beyond the realm of historical investigation. Not in the sense that they are off limits to history, for history like all ways of knowing can inquire freely everywhere and there are no privileged enclaves, but rather with the recognition that for much of the really important stuff in life, from mangoes to mathematics, from metaphysics to morality to the mambo, history is not the cognitive trump card. Indeed, it is often the least interesting or useful card in the epistemological deck. If historians themselves are not willing to grant that their craft is at best a crude sieve that catches some big chunks but lets a lot of fine stuff through, then the state of discipline is more dire than I had thought.

Finally, Professor Collins repeats a point that I have heard frequently during this past year. She agrees that the resurrection may be the *necessary* cause of Christianity, but disagrees that it is also the *sufficient* cause. She insists that some continuity must obtain between the human Jesus and the risen Lord, and states that history is the way to establish that continuity. Let me state first my delight at her agreement with the first part of my thesis, for by no means is such a conviction universal among my interlocutors. But concerning the issue of continuity, the New Testament writings themselves (above all Paul) establish the link on the basis of Jesus' *character*: it was because of Jesus' obedient faith in God and self-disposing love of humans that God raised him in glory. History, however, is incapable of finding or demonstrating or disconfirming that link in continuity between the human Jesus and the risen Lord. Its attempts in any of these directions, furthermore, inevitably end up with quite a different understanding of Jesus than that offered by the Gospels and the other New Testament writings.

RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR WALTER WINK

I also appreciate Professor Walter Wink's full reply and the courtesy he extended of making it available to me in good time. As he indicated to you, time did not permit him to read all his manuscript, so he chose (quite rightly in my view) to read only the sections in which he took me to task, rather than the sections where he shared some of my views. Professor Wink uses the clever device of a seven-round boxing match between the "Questers and the Questioners." Although as he admits he is clearly on the side of the questers--and indeed one of them—he is willing, at this stage of the debate to call it a draw, and concludes that "basically this is good clean fun." I am not sure, however, that I am willing to grant that this is just about having fun, or should be. I know from Professor Wink's own early work *The Bible in Human Transformation*, which was a passionate protest

against the hegemony of the historical-critical method, that he himself considers the stakes higher than good gamesmanship. This makes his present position puzzling in many respects.

Take, for example, his testimony to the collegiality he experienced in the deliberations of the Jesus Seminar, even as he confesses that he also experienced deep embarrassment at many of the Seminar's pronouncements. My question is, when do scholars become responsible for distancing themselves from the kinds of statements so notoriously made—especially by Robert Funk—to the eager press? When does it become a demand of academic integrity publicly to distinguish between what one truly believes and a game in which one has temporarily dabbled? After the publication of my book, I have been intrigued by the fact that Professors Crossan and Borg have likewise, in public, now distinguished their projects from that of the Seminar. But they did not do so in the ten years prior to my book. Nor have they even now, at least to my knowledge, disavowed the carelessness reflected by the Seminar's periodic proclamations. Do we as a professional guild have some responsibility to name inferior work? And if we ignore or perhaps cannot any longer identify inferior work, do we deserve to be called a professional guild?

The part of Professor Wink's criticism called "Round Four" provides the best place to focus the issues, for here he moves past stylistics to the substantive objections I make to the Seminar and other historical Jesus productions.

a. He objects to my stating that they abandon the Gospels, counterasserting that they study every bit of all the Gospels. He misses my point. They study the bits, yes, or at least the bits they determine to be authentic. But they clearly abandon the narrative framework of the Gospels, in which alone the character of Jesus is to be discovered.

b. He agrees that they don't make use of Paul, but declares the information offered by Paul to be insignificant even if it is granted factual status—here, however, he fails completely to take up my fairly extensive argument concerning the importance of the narrative structure concerning Jesus that is found in Paul's letters.

c. He agrees that the questers have a social agenda, but finds no difficulty in this. He says rather than the problem lies with me: because I am too privatized in my views I don't appreciate what they are doing.

d. He agrees that they are seeking with a reconstruction of Jesus to gain leverage against the tradition of the church, which, as I have suggested, he portrays in completely negative fashion.

In short, with the exception of the first point, Professor Wink completely agrees with my characterization of what the Seminar and the books I have criticized are up to! The difference between us is

that he thinks this is all good, and I do not: not good historical method, not good theological method, but an unfortunate mixture of the worst in both disciplines. The point I want to emphasize here is that, apart from complaints about my plain speech and my implied elitism—complaints that have generated considerable laughter here this morning—neither Professor Wink nor any of my other critics have yet stated that I have misunderstood or mischaracterized what they are doing. Indeed, if my information of this weekend is correct, the internal dividedness that I discerned within the Jesus Seminar—the gap between its claims of historical disinterestedness and its cultural revisionism—is becoming the basis of an internal rift among Seminar participants themselves.

So when, in Wink's "Rounds Six and Seven" he declares that ideology has more than a bit to do with all this, he is surely correct. But he complains that I have not declared what he calls my Roman Catholic ideological basis. I have three responses. The first is that no other reader has complained of my hiding any of my biases in this book! The second is that I do not consider that my characterization of the resurrection faith of the Christian tradition has anything specifically Roman Catholic about it—I make no arguments concerning Mary, the Magisterium, or Papal Primacy. But even if it is my own confessional bias, thirdly, it is an ideology that affects my construal of faith and the Christian tradition. It is a bias that insists that faith be based on what is appropriate to faith. It is not, I think, an ideology driving or distorting a discipline that is supposed to have its own integrity, namely the discipline called History. Which was my point.