

Who Needs Jesus?

What value is a first-century Galilean holy man in today's world?

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Introduction

As I engage with the general theme of the conference—*Who Needs Jesus? Life in the twenty-first century*.—I am happy to report there is still something left to say despite the comprehensive and engaging presentations we have already heard. As the final speaker in this series, I am also able to consider some of the questions that have emerged from floor over the past two days.

Like everyone else I engage with the set question from a particular viewpoint, and that has itself been shaped by my own experiences and my own faith commitments. You will doubtless observe considerable overlap with the perspectives offered by each of the other speakers, as well as some kind of 'fit' with your own perspectives. But you will also discern some differences.

As I engage with our conference question, I will execute three rhetorical moves and the overlap with those speakers who have preceded me will be most marked in the first two:

First of all, I shall seek to clarify which Jesus—that is, *whose* Jesus—we are speaking about in this conversation.

Secondly I shall seek to identify the core problem with Jesus today—and that involves more than simply the passage of 2,000 years.

Finally, and as my substantive contribution to our deliberations this weekend, I will explore some ways in which contemporary people may engage with Jesus today

Before embarking on that three-phase process, I want to offer an over-arching model—a metaphor—that may be helpful in our perception of the forest as we find ourselves among so many different trees.

My core idea in what follows concerns how Jesus is shared among contemporary spiritual communities in the modern world. I suggest that the metaphor of the End User License Agreement (EULA) may be helpful.

The EULA has become a feature of contemporary technology licensing, and any of us who have installed new or updated software on our computers and mobile telephones will be familiar with them.

Here is one description of EULA:

Some end-user license agreements (EULAs) accompany shrink wrapped software that is presented to a user sometimes on paper or more usually electronically, during the installation procedure. The user has the choice of accepting or rejecting the agreement, without reading it first. The installation of the software is conditional to the user accepting the agreement and thereby agreeing to abide by

its terms. Once the user has installed the software, then he/she has the opportunity to read the license agreement in detail.¹

I invite you to explore some ways to let Jesus loose so that he is freed of our theological End User License Agreements and allowed to become what he may in the spiritual imagination of other religious communities. This will involve relinquishing our traditional rights over the 'Jesus' label and embracing the ancient-yet-modern challenge of an open source community of the Spirit.

The following *Creative Commons License* logo is evocative of the new possibilities if Jesus is allowed to take new forms within the imagination and practices of contemporary faith communities:



As we pursue these questions in this session, I ask that we especially note some examples of the 'open-source Jesus' project across different times and cultures. Two of them are current projects, while the other two are more historical examples. Together they illustrate some of the possibilities as well as some of the challenges involved in such a project.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/EULA> [accessed 28 March 2008]

A Thumbnail Sketch of the Galilean Jesus

As we begin our discussion it will be good to clarify which Jesus is in view. I invite you to consider the historical Jesus of ancient Galilee, rather than the Pauline Christ or the Johannine Logos.

With an eye to brevity at this point in the process, let me offer this thumbnail sketch:

1. Jesus was a first-century Jewish holy man from Galilee (not Jerusalem).
2. Jesus was technically illiterate (he read no books, wrote no books, quoted no books) but an accomplished oral author whose message was especially expressed in aphorisms and parables.
3. Jesus was a prophet of the empire/commonwealth (kingdom) of God.
4. Jesus encouraged people to make God's reign a present reality by their compassionate action (healings, open table, mutual forgiveness, etc)
5. Jesus paid the ultimate price of martyrdom for his faithfulness to his vision of God's empire.
6. Jesus continued to shape the spiritual imagination of his followers after his death, even if they had never known him personally during his lifetime, and came to be experienced as a spiritual reality in the lives of people (a gateway into the mystery of God as experienced in and through humanity).

The Problem of Jesus Today

Christianity itself is the main impediment to people appreciating Jesus today; and specifically the churches. That criticism includes those expressions of Christianity which pride themselves on their capacity to be 'relevant' as well as historic forms of Christianity with a more traditional demeanour.

Indeed, my personal hunch is that traditional forms of Christianity would have more 'street cred' if their counter-cultural religious forms were matched with consistent public performance when it comes to power, wealth, privilege and transparency. In particular, the scandal of sexual abuse within the churches and the matching scandal of sustained cover-ups and risk management, has seriously impaired the ancient churches' capacity to speak about Jesus with authenticity.

In the case of the newer forms of Christianity, I see a basic lack of fit with the real world. Despite their comparative advantage as 'clean skins' the forms of Christianity that define themselves over against traditional church have the problem of their own deep suspicion of, and antipathy towards, modernity. Beneath the veneer of contemporary culture—the pop music and the clever marketing—lies a hankering for a vanished past when the Bible dominated the cognitive landscape of the Western imagination and life seemed much simpler.

We no longer live in that kind of world, and in time the irrelevance of those who especially prize their capacity to be relevant will become obvious.

It seems Jesus is not well served by those who claim to have the franchise for his label in the spiritual market-place of the twenty-first century.

In addition to the barriers created by Jesus' own followers, there is also the problem arising from the profound cultural gap between Jesus then and us now:

- our sense of what it means to be human is so different
- our knowledge of the cosmos and its 15 billion year story (so far)
- our appreciation of the scale and complexity of the web of life

We can do so much (and far more than the ancients imagined) and yet we believe so little (and far less than the ancients accepted as normal). In particular, we are dealing with:

- the loss of the supernatural
- the loss of historicity as the Bible dissolves into myth and legend
- acceptance of the reality and 'goodness' of other religious traditions

Consequently, the 'big ticket' items on the Jesus CV mean so little to us today

- agent of divine creation of the cosmos
- miraculous conception and virgin mother
- illuminated soul
- healer and exorcist
- miracle worker (storms stilled, walk on water, feed crowds, pass locked doors)
- death as atonement for sin
- resurrection
- ascension
- sitting at God's right hand on high
- return to judge the world
- Lord of the universe

Jesus as Icon of Sacred Wisdom (aka Wisdom for Life)

Come with me on a brief survey of some ways in which Jesus may still be relevant to people of diverse religious perspectives in today's world. We begin with Christianity.

Jesus and the Christians

In some progressive expressions of Christianity we can see an interest in re-framing how Jesus is understood. This is difficult and dangerous work as it can attract hostile attention from traditionalists who are enjoying a resurgence as they seek to postpone the demise of the church with loud assertions rather than radical revisioning.

From my own experience it seems there are two major hurdles for the much-needed re-visioning of Christianity in the twenty-first century:

- The first concerns the special significance of Jesus. It is usually expressed in terms of the uniqueness of Christ, which seems to be code for "Jesus is God"—which is bad theology but a rhetorical sleight of hand that often passes for a good argument.
- The other is belief in the resurrection as a historical event that involved some kind of change in the physical nature (and location) of Jesus' mortal remains.

Skirmishes around these two critical issues are often disguised as debates about the authority of the Bible. However, when carefully analysed these are actually theological tripwires: two points of dogma concerning which traditionalist Christians with otherwise very different (and sometimes diametrically opposed) theological opinions will accept no dissent.

Despite the special status of these two beliefs, both of which relate directly to Jesus, many contemporary Christians are moving to embrace a less literal interpretation of the divinity of Jesus and the resurrection.²

In this respect the Fellows of the *Jesus Seminar* have been evangelists of critical scholarship. They did not create the liberal re-framing of Christianity that has its roots in the Enlightenment and the more intellectual expressions of Christian faith in Europe. But they have been apostles of the Enlightenment into the popular religious culture of the USA and, to a lesser extent, the moribund theological and ecclesial establishments in the Antipodes.

The Center for Progressive Christianity (TCPC) in the USA has crafted an eight-point statement³ that nicely captures the kind of gentle re-visioning of Jesus that is happening in many progressive expressions of Christianity around the world.

TCPC offers a description of ‘progressive Christians’ as people who:

1. *Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus.*
2. *Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us.*
3. *Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus's name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples.*
4. *Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable (including but not limited to): believers and agnostics, conventional Christians and questioning skeptics, women and men, those of all sexual orientations and gender identities, those of all races and cultures, those of all classes and abilities, those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope.*
5. *Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe.*
6. *Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty - more value in questioning than in absolutes.*
7. *Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers.*
8. *Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails selfless love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.*

² For a recent analysis of progressive Christianity, see Hal Taussig, *A New Spiritual Home. Progressive Christianity at the Grass Roots*. Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2006.

³ See <http://www.tpcp.org/about/8points.cfm> [accessed 1 September 2009].

Such a modest re-visioning of Jesus is implicit in contemporary interfaith dialogue, where listening and learning displaces proclamation and evangelism. To the extent that Jesus is seen as a great spiritual leader, one of a group rather than unique, this kind of re-visioning is being allowed some scope.

We might also see signs of this re-visioning in the new forms of missionary work that people of goodwill find they can support. Faith-based action for community development—and especially action in response to crisis—need not presuppose a unique ontological status for Jesus. It can simply be a compassionate response to the needs of our neighbours; and authentically Christian precisely because of that.

Re-visioning the way Jesus is appreciated within Christianity itself does not mean that Christian devotion to Jesus should be apologetic or even minimalistic. For Christians it remains important to have a rich and complex vocabulary to articulate our faith, including our experience of God in/through Jesus.

That language will be descriptive, not prescriptive. It will be seen as deriving from an exclusive commitment within a relationship between the Christian and her god, but it is not making ontological claims for unparalleled qualities found nowhere else.

Like the words of the lover for the beloved, this is the language of devotion. It expresses reality as we perceive it and experience it. It is hyperbolic. It is symbolic. It generates and sustains commitment, but it is not necessarily accessible to a detached observer.

Here is one example of a progressive and positive Jesus-centric liturgy:⁴

May God be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to heaven.

Let us give thanks to the Creator of all.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Gracious and loving God,
in whom we live and move and have our being:
we offer our praise for the gift of a world full of wonder,
and for our life which comes from you.

Glory to you for ever and ever.

We give our thanks for Jesus the carpenter, the son of Mary,
the gift from Nazareth to all the world.

He brought good news to the poor, the hungry, and those who weep.

He showed us how to see heaven through the eyes of a child.

He taught us that everyone who asks receives, everyone who seeks finds,
and that for all who knock, the door will be opened.

Therefore, we raise our voices with all creation
to proclaim the glory of your name:

Come, rejoice in God; praise him all the earth.

Serve your God, serve your God, gladly serve your God!

Hallelujah, hallelujah, gladly serve your God;

hallelujah, hallelujah, gladly serve your God!

⁴ Written by Gary Botha, a Canadian Anglican priest, and published on the Jesus Database web site: http://www.jesusdatabase.org/index.php?title=Historical_Jesus_Thanksgiving [accessed 27 Sep 2009]

We celebrate the joy of heaven's domain,
as Jesus has taught us, right here in our presence:
the hidden treasure found in a field,
the tiny mustard seed and the small piece of leaven,
the prodigal returned
and the lost sheep carried home by the shepherd.

Glory to you for ever and ever.

We ask for grace and mercy
so that we may remove the timber from our own eye
before the splinter in our friend's eye,
and refrain from casting the first stone;
may we not be enslaved to our possessions
and not lose our life in trying to preserve it.

Glory to you for ever and ever.

Make us aware of others,
make us compassionate;
give us grace to love our enemies
and find forgiveness in our forgiving.
Wash us inside and out
that we may know again heaven's domain
spread out upon the earth,
and never fret again about life,
but grow instead like the lilies, decked out in glory.

Glory to you for ever and ever.

Heal our world and what we have become,
we pray in the name of Jesus,
who drove out demons and healed the sick,
who welcomed outcasts and sinners at table,
and taught us to pray for the bread we need for the day.

Glory to you for ever and ever.

All things come from you,
and of your own have we given you.
Bless now these gifts
and this sacrament of praise and thanksgiving.
May we eat this bread and drink this cup,
mindful of the life and teaching of Jesus.
May we eat this bread and drink this cup,
strengthened by his body and blood.
May we eat this bread and drink this cup,
mindful of the presence of heaven.

Glory to you for ever and ever.

Send your Spirit upon us,
that all who eat and drink at this table
may be one body and one holy people;
through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ,
in the unity of the Spirit,
all glory and honour are yours,
Creator of all.

Glory to you for ever and ever.

As we become comfortable in our own spiritual skins, progressive Christians will make extravagant claims about Jesus. These claims express what Jesus means to us, they do not prescribe what he must mean to others.

In a world of many faiths—and no faith—the devotees of Jesus must move beyond a juvenile need to have a better god than anyone else. It will suffice to affirm that we encounter the human face of our God in Jesus.

Jewish reappraisals of Jesus

More than any other community, the Jews have a particular stake in Jesus.

After centuries of mutual fear and recrimination with their socially dominant Christian neighbours, Jewish scholars have emerged from the shadows of the ghetto to engage their Christian counterparts and to reclaim Jesus as the most important Jewish figure of all time.

In addition to the major work done by Geza Vermes⁵ over several decades, it is interesting to note the observation of David Flusser that he considered the most important thing he could achieve as an Orthodox Jew was to make the teachings of Jesus more widely known for the sake of the world.⁶

In his review of Schalom Ben-Chorin book, *Brother Jesus*, Frank Eaton—the Weinstein-Rosenthal Professor of Jewish and Christian Studies, Department of Religion, University of Richmond—notes with approval that Ben-Chorin

... quotes (p. 5) from Martin Buber's *Two Types of Faith* wherein Buber stated: "From my youth onwards I have found in Jesus my great brother ... My own fraternally open relationship to him has grown ever stronger and clearer ..." Ben-Chorin responds: "Buber's confession defines my own position. Jesus is for me an eternal brother—not only my human brother but my Jewish brother".⁷

Such claims startle many Christians. A Jewish Jesus? But why not? Indeed, what else?

The dangerous memory of the religion of Jesus the Jew has been largely obscured in the beliefs and practices of the Church that claims ownership of his legacy. Might it not be that a Jewish perspective on their most famous son could revitalise the legacy of Jesus once more within the churches as well as in other parts of our society?

At the same time, my own experience as a member of the Australian Jewish-Anglican Dialogue has shown me how difficult it is for contemporary Jews to give Jesus a significant role within their own faith and practice. Within the academy, Jewish scholars make a significant contribution to our understanding of Jesus and the whole question of Christian origins. However, in the synagogues—as in the majority of churches—there is little interest in such questions.

To my initial—and perhaps naïve—surprise, the Jewish members of that dialogue were not only unaware of Jewish scholarship into Jesus and Christian origins; some seriously

⁵ Relevant titles by Geza Vermes include, *Jesus the Jew*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981); *The Changing Faces of Jesus*. (London: Penguin, 2000) and *Jesus in His Jewish Context*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2003).

⁶ David Flusser, *Jesus* (3rd ed. Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2001).

⁷ Frank E. Eaton, "Our Brother Jesus." *Menorah Review* 61(Summer/Fall 2004): 5.

entertained suggestions that Jesus had never actually existed. That struck me then, and still strikes me, as a rather confrontational position to take into a formal dialogue between two religious communities.

However, I can also see that their profound lack of interest in Jesus arises from the realities of their experience as Jewish people in the Western world. Their experience of Jesus has been overwhelmingly as the symbol of Christianity's simultaneous rejection of Judaism and theft of its spiritual treasures. We expropriated their God and their Bible, their prophets and their sacred stories; their moral law and their Sabbath. In the process we redefined all these treasures. We created theologies that justified the demonization of the 'perfidious Jew' and we elevated Jesus as the first Christian rather than a radical Jew.

In her recent book, *The Misunderstood Jew*, Amy-Jill Levine⁸ has made a strong case for the pervasive tendency of even the most liberal and tolerant Christian progressives to stereotype Judaism as the epitome of undesirable religious and social values. In contrast, the remarkable Jesus—mysteriously deprived of his proper Jewish character—is celebrated as someone who crosses social boundaries, liberates women, includes the marginalised, etc.

Transvaluation of a figure from someone else's religious tradition is much easier when the import comes from an earlier tradition, and especially an earlier stage of the same trajectory. We see this in the way that Christians readily embrace Jewish characters from the Old Testament, or a contemporary of Jesus such as "St John Baptist"; but take offence when Jesus is co-opted as a Muslim prophet.

I suspect that before the Jewish community will be able to engage seriously with the significance of their own Jesus, Christians will need to repudiate our persistent anti-Judaism.

Until Christians combine renunciation of anti-Jewish prejudice with a genuine appreciation of the *essential Jewishness* of the Jesus attributes we most admire, a Jewish re-appraisal of Jesus seems likely to remain an elite sport for Jewish academics with a special interest in interfaith relations. The first step is for our new appreciation of Jesus as a first-century Galilean Jew to transform Christian perceptions of Jews and Judaism.

If Christians can celebrate the *Jewishness* of Jesus we may go some way to giving Jesus back to the Jews. However, until and unless Christians find some genuine common ground with their Jewish neighbours—some shared agenda to which Jesus speaks—I suspect that Jewish interest in Jesus will be restricted to the academy.

However, I can cite at least one example of an Orthodox Israeli Jew who engages directly with Jesus as a way of making sense of his own experience as a Jew. Richard E. Sherwin often refers to Jesus in his poetry that explores various dimensions of Jewish identity and destiny. The following poem was first composed in 1951 and is reproduced here with the kind permission of the author.

⁸ A Jewish scholar who teaches in a primarily Protestant divinity school, Amy-Jill Levine is the E. Rhodes & Leona B. Carpenter Professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, Tennessee. See *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*. (San Francisco: Harper, 2006).

on damascus road

I met my old friend jesus
and warned him not to
tell a soul he's jewish not
christian not moslem theyre

after our ass white
brown messiah or prophet
nothing helps gospel
truth i swore the synagogues
fire bombed no need of romans

free enterprise mobs
mullahs priests postmoderns and
churches youre done for
man youre hung up to dry and
die unresurrectably

inside their pagan
hearts youre unforgivable
like us for giving
them Gd they choke on till
chopped into three and blood dunked

or dumped—i'd nothing
for or against him he's not
to blame for what paul's
remorse theologized as
second class circumcision

well hidden hearts can
claim inherits jewish truth
and goods and heaven
and anyway a jews a
jew and all for one and Gd

i wouldnt wish a
second crucifixion on
anyone and not
a first one on a jew—and
dont know where he went or where

we're going but i
pray we get there safely what
with all this fury
bursting minds and souls and flesh
and all because of Sinai

Jesus in traditional Islamic literature (not modern polemics)

The Muslim stake in Jesus is rather different from the Jewish interest, and it has left its mark on Islamic beliefs and practices across more than a thousand years. It may be important for the post-Christian yet persistently Islamophobic West to note the long engagement with Jesus by the Muslim community.

Like Abraham, Moses and David before him, Jesus has been integrated into Islam and transvalued as the greatest of the prophets prior to Muhammad, and continues to be revered as Christ and Word of God.

Tarif Khalidi's helpful collection, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*,⁹ has helped to make the rich legacy of Islamic texts about Jesus more accessible. He gathers together more than 300 items from Islamic texts covering some eleven hundred years—from the eighth century to the eighteenth century.

Jesus in the Qur'an

There are at least 27 explicit references to Isa (Jesus) in the Qur'an in addition to other passages that refer to Christianity or the Gospel.¹⁰

Neal Robinson has observed that interpreting these references is a complex task, due to a variety of reasons, including the need to account for the order of the revelations now preserved in the Qur'an and "the possibility that the Qur'anic representation of Jesus developed and changed with the passage of time."¹¹

While allowing for Robinson's caveat, it may be helpful to note the description of the Qur'anic material about Jesus that Tarif Khalidi offers:

With respect to form, the references to Jesus in the Qur'an can be divided into four groups: (1) birth and infancy stories, (2) miracles, (3) conversations between Jesus and God or between Jesus and the Israelites, and (4) divine pronouncements on his humanity, servanthood, and place in the prophetic line which stipulate that "fanatical" opinions about him must be abandoned.¹²

The first two categories show many affinities with canonical and apocryphal Christian traditions, and it may well be the case that we find in the Qur'an and in later Muslim writings evidence for one of the trajectories in which traditions about Jesus were preserved and modified.

The last two categories in the Qur'an are where we especially find the transvaluation of Jesus being effected, but this is also seen in the way that the Qur'an "tilts backward to his miraculous birth rather than forward to his Passion."¹³

This process is not so much directed to the religious needs of the Muslim faithful as it is an exercise intended to persuade Christians to modify their understanding of Jesus and integrate with Islam.

⁹ Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

¹⁰ Hans Küng (*Islam: Past, Present and Future*. [Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007], 489) describes the Qur'anic data as follows: "fifteen surahs mention him, and more than a hundred verses are devoted to him."

¹¹ Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity. The representation of Jesus in the Qur'an and the Classical Muslim Commentaries*. (London: Macmillan, 1991), 7.

¹² *The Muslim Jesus*, 14.

¹³ *The Muslim Jesus*, 14.

Jesus in the hadiths and in popular folklore

Tarif Khalidi notes that traditions about Jesus developed along two quite different routes in the early Islamic period.

The more authoritative traditions preserved in the *hadiths* tended to deal with Jesus as an apocalyptic (or, perhaps better, eschatological) figure who would appear in the last days to complete a series of tasks prior to the end of the world. These tasks include the defeat of the Antichrist (known as *Dajjal* in Islamic texts) and the establishment of a short messianic golden age.¹⁴

As the *hadiths* were becoming standardised by the ninth century CE, Islamic traditions about Jesus continued to be preserved in other forms of literature. Khalidi describes the “parting of the ways” in these terms:

The Jesus of the eschaton was enshrined in authoritative Hadith collections, becoming a somewhat distant figure of no immediate or pragmatic moral relevance to Muslim piety. But another Jesus continued to prosper—the Jesus encountered in works of piety and asceticism and in a genre of literature called “Tales of the Prophets” (*Qisas al-Anbiya*), where he was not only **a living moral force** but also a figure who played a role in intra-Muslim polemics.¹⁵ [emphasis added]

For the purposes of this paper, it will suffice to cite just a couple of stories to illustrate how Jesus was transvalued by devout Muslims in the very earliest Islamic period.

2 Jesus said, “Blessed is he who guards his tongue, whose house is sufficient for his needs, and who weeps for his sins.”

4 Jesus said, “If it is a day of fasting for one of you, let him anoint his head and beard and wipe his lips so that people will not know that he is fasting. If he gives with the right hand, let him hide this from his left hand. If he prays, let him pull down the door curtain, for God apportions praise as He apportions livelihood.”

7 Jesus said to his disciples, “Do not take wages from those whom you teach, except such wages as you gave me. Salt of the earth, do not become corrupt. Everything when it becomes corrupt can be treated with salt, but if salt is corrupted it has no remedy. Know that you possess two traits of ignorance: laughter without [cause for] wonder, and morning nap without wakefulness.”

8 Jesus said to his disciples, “Just as kings have left wisdom to you, so you should leave the world to them.”

16 Jesus addressed his followers the night he was raised to heaven, saying: “Do not make your living from [teaching] the Book of God. If you refrain from doing so, God will seat you upon pulpits a single stone of which is better than the world and all that is therein.” 'Abd al-Jabbar said, “These are the seats mentioned by God in the Qur’an: ‘Upon a seat of truth with a mighty king.’” Jesus was then raised to heaven.

¹⁴ For a convenient set of relevant extracts from Islamic texts, see <http://www.islam.tc/prophesies/jesus.html> [accessed 28 March 2008].

¹⁵ *The Muslim Jesus*, 26. Khalidi later notes that “Amid this literature as a whole, Jesus stands out for the quantity and above all for the quality of his sayings and stories. Whereas the sayings and tales of other prophets tend to conform to specific and narrowly defined moral types, the range and continuous growth of the Jesus corpus has no parallel among other prophets in the Muslim tradition.” (page 29).

Jesus in the poems of Rumi

The final example of Muslim interest in Jesus that we shall consider comes from the thirteenth century CE, in the writings of the Sufi poet, *Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi* (1207-1273). There are numerous references to Jesus in his poems, and they delightfully illustrate how Jesus was appreciated as a living spiritual force (to adapt the previous expression of Khalidi) some 700 years after the flight from Mecca.

A church in Shiraz (Iran) has these words of Rumi carved in stone over its door:

Where Jesus lives, the great-hearted gather. We are a door that's never locked.
If you are suffering any kind of pain, stay near this door. Open it.¹⁶

This poem attributed to Rumi has a similar theme:

I called through your door, "The mystics are gathering in the street. Come out!"
"Leave me alone. I'm sick."
"I don't care if you're dead!" Jesus is here, and he wants to resurrect
somebody!¹⁷

The interest in Jesus as "son of Mary" is seen in the next example, but the idea of each Muslim having "a Jesus Christ within" as a possible source of wisdom and blessing is notable:

For instance, unless the Virgin Mary has birth pangs, she has not gone to that tree of destiny. As it is mentioned in the Holy Koran, "The birth pangs have led her to lean against the trunk of a date tree." (19/22) Trouble has taken her to that tree and the dried tree has turned into a fruit-bearing tree.

The birth is like Mary: each of us has a Jesus Christ within. If worry springs up in us, our Christ will be born. If not, the Christ will go back to his origin, taking the secret way he has come. We, therefore, will be deprived of his benefits.¹⁸

The following example seems worth citing at some length:

The son of Mary, Jesus, hurries up a slope
as though a wild animal were chasing him.
Someone following him asks, 'Where are you going?
No one is after you.' Jesus keeps on,
saying nothing, across two more fields. 'Are you
the one who says words over a dead person,
so that he wakes up?' I am. 'Did you not make
the clay birds fly?' Yes. 'Who then
could possibly cause you to run like this?'
Jesus slows his pace.

I say the Great Name over the deaf and the blind,
they are healed. Over a stony mountainside,
and it tears its mantle down to the navel.
Over non-existence, it comes into existence.
But when I speak lovingly for hours, for days,
with those who take human warmth

¹⁶ <http://dionpugil.wordpress.com/category/rumi/> [accessed 28 March 2008].

¹⁷ <http://dionpugil.wordpress.com/category/rumi/> [accessed 28 March 2008].

¹⁸ From the poem, "Trouble leads the Way" [<http://www.mevlana.cc/rumi/> accessed 28 March 2008].

and mock it, when I say the Name to them, nothing happens. They remain rock, or turn to sand, where no plants can grow. Other diseases are ways for mercy to enter, but this non-responding breeds violence and coldness toward God. I am fleeing from that.

As little by little air steals water, so praise is dried up and evaporates with foolish people who refuse to change. Like cold stone you sit on, a cynic steals body heat. He doesn't feel the sun. Jesus wasn't running from actual people. He was teaching in a new way.¹⁹

This next extract is from a larger poem known as "There is Nothing Ahead":

The miracle of Jesus is himself, not what he said or did about the future. Forget the future. I'd worship someone who could do that!²⁰

The motif of the open table in the ministry of Jesus seems to have its echo in this poem:

There's hidden sweetness in the stomach's emptiness. We are lutes, no more, no less. If the soundbox is stuffed full of anything, no music. If the brain and the belly are burning clean with fasting, every moment a new song comes out of the fire. The fog clears, and new energy makes you run up the steps in front of you. Be emptier and cry like reed instruments cry. Emptier, write secrets with the reed pen. When you're full of food and drink, Satan sits where your spirit should be, an ugly metal statue in place of the Kaaba. When you fast good habits gather like friends who want to help. Fasting is Solomon's ring. Don't give it to some illusion and lose your power, but even if you have, if you've lost all will and control, they come back when you fast, like soldiers appearing out of the ground, pennants flying above them. A table descends to your tents, Jesus' table. Expect to see it, when you fast, this table spread with other food, better than the broth of cabbages.²¹

¹⁹ "What Jesus Runs Away From." [<http://www.goodnews.ie/wisdomlinevrolik.htm> accessed 28 March 2008].

²⁰ John Moyne & Coleman Banks. *The Open Secret. Versions of Rumi*. (Putney, VT: Threshold Books, 1984), 27.

²¹ *The Open Secret*, 42.

In his poem “The Shop”, Rumi writes at one point:

You and I have worked in the same shop for years.
Our loves are great fellow-workers.
Friends cluster there and every moment we notice
a new light coming out in the sky.
Invisible, yet taking form, like Christ coming through
Mary. In the cradle, God.²²

Finally, I offer this example from the poem, “The Phrasing Must Change”:

Learn about your inner self from those who know such things,
but don't repeat verbatim what they say.
Zuleika let everything be the name of Joseph, from celery seed
to aloes-wood. She loved him so much, she concealed his name
in many different phrases, the inner meanings
known only to her. When she said, The wax is softening
near the fire, she meant, My love is wanting me.
Or if she said, Look, the moon is up, or The willow has new leaves,
or The branches are trembling, or The coriander seeds
have caught fire, or The roses are opening,
or The king is in a good mood today, or Isn't that lucky,
or The furniture needs dusting, or
The water-carrier is here, or It's almost daylight, or
These vegetables are perfect, or The bread needs more salt,
or The clouds seem to be moving against the wind,
or My head hurts, or My headache is better,
anything she praises, it's Joseph's touch she means,
any complaint, it's his being away.
When she's hungry, it's for him. Thirsty, his name is a sherbet.
Cold, he's a fur. This is what the Friend can do
when one is in such love. Sensual people use the holy names
often, but they don't work for them.
The miracle Jesus did by being the name of God,
Zuleika felt in the name of Joseph.²³

Please note that such references to Jesus do not undermine the Islamic identity of Rumi or his readers. The “Muslim Jesus” does not convert Muslims to Christianity, but enhances and enriches their faithfulness as Muslims.

At the same time, qualitative spiritual themes that seem authentic to the figure of Jesus can be affirmed and celebrated within Muslim piety and practice when Jesus is allowed to associate in an Islamic context without the overt Christological significance that he has for Christians.

²² *The Open Secret*, 67.

²³ R.A. Nicholson, *The Mathnawi of Jalauddin Rumi*. (8 vols. London: Luzac & Co., 1925-1940) Book VI, 4020 cited in *The Open Secret*, 82.

Küng expresses regret at the depiction of a

fully Islamicized Jesus, reduced to what is known from the Islamic tradition, the hadith or Sufism, with or without him. His behaviour, his words and the states of his soul make him seem the perfect Sufi but he loses his own profile in the process and so is difficult for Christians to recognize. In this Jesus, we do not find the slightest echo of the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes and the many other aspects of his life and conduct which are important for Christians. The Jesus of the Gospels had distinctive things to say about poverty, humility and other mystical values but in the works of the Sufis he is only to confirm these values.²⁴

However, this understates the survival of traditional Christian elements in the popular Muslim Jesus traditions and also fails to appreciate the creative and original ways in which the figure of Jesus functions in the poetry of a Sufi such as Rumi. Even so, the creative independence of Jesus within Islam would doubtless be enhanced by more attention to the results of critical historical Jesus studies.

The Jade-Faced One—Jesus in ancient Chinese Christianity

The so-called “Jesus Sutras” from seventh century China remind us of other times and places when the Jesus figure has taken fresh forms in different religious and cultural environments.²⁵ While not a living example of Jesus being shared with other spiritual traditions, these ancient texts from the Tang Dynasty remind us of some options when we think outside the box of western historical developments.

These texts seem to reflect an ancient Christian mission to China, originating from the so-called “Church of the East.”²⁶ The Christian tradition reflected and refracted in these Chinese texts is oriental and non-Chalcedonian in character, and it may already have engaged significantly with Buddhist ideas prior to arrival in China. In any case, it seems that the surviving texts employ an amalgam of Christian, Buddhist and Taoist ideas while seeking to express Christianity in a way that fitted their Chinese context.

In the texts Christianity is referred to as the ‘Luminous Religion’ and is said to have come from ‘Da Qin’—an ancient Chinese name for the Roman Empire. Jesus is called ‘the World Honoured One’ and is represented as a teacher of sacred wisdom rather than as a divine victim, sacrificed to redeem the world from its sins.

It may suffice to cite a couple of representative examples, as these will illustrate the ways in which these ancient Christian monks articulated their understanding of Jesus within the Chinese context, and they will also invite us to imagine new ways in which Jesus could be enculturated in new contexts while retaining his capacity to function as a “living moral (and spiritual) force”—to misquote Khalidi slightly.

²⁴ *Islam*, 500.

²⁵ For an introduction to these texts and the history of their discovery, see Martin Palmer in association with Eva Wong, Tjalling Halbertsma, Zhao Xiao Min, Li Rong Rong, and James Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity*. (New York, NY: Ballantine, 2001). Another helpful introduction, and one which takes a different approach from Martin Palmer in some respects, see Ray Riegert and Thomas Moore, eds., *The Lost Sutras of Jesus: Unlocking the Ancient Wisdom of the Xian Monks*. Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press, 2003.

²⁶ The Church of the East is commonly misrepresented as a Nestorian community, but it is more correct to note that it is a community that had never subscribed to the Christological definitions of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE.

In the examples that follow we hear Jesus with a Chinese accent, and perhaps we are reminded that Jesus will always be something of an alien in our western tradition. In some ways Jesus belongs to the East rather than to us.

The World Honored One said, If somebody gives alms, they should do it in the knowledge of the World Honored One. 2 Let not your left hand know what your right hand is doing. 3 Pay no attention to outsiders but worship the One Sacred Spirit. 4 The One will become visible to you, and then you should worship only the One.

5 Don't hesitate when you pray. 6 Ask first for forgiveness for your sins and at the same time forgive those who have sinned against you. 7 The Heavenly Ruler above will forgive you as you forgive others.

8 If you have a treasure, do not store it on earth where it can decay or be stolen. 9 Instead present it to heaven, where it will not rot or be stolen.
[*Sutra of the Teachings of the World-Honored One*, 1:1–9]²⁷

The death of Jesus continues to be a significant part of this tradition, but it seems not to have the same dominance in their understanding of Jesus:

Some will try to teach you bad ways, but good and evil can be told apart. 2 It is for this reason that the Law has been revealed. 3 The Messiah knew all this and acted accordingly. 4 He shone brightly for three years and six months. 5 He was a student at home until he was killed by being hung on high. 6 There was a Jew who had been a follower but then set his hand against him. 7 The Messiah predicted his death three days beforehand. 8 Any who wish to live after death and go to Heaven can now do so. 9 The Holy acted in a short time to show people what to believe. 10 He taught over three years and six months, after which it is a matter of believing yourself.

[*Sutra of the Teachings of the World-Honored One*, 3:1–10]

As a lamb goes silently to be slaughtered so he was silent, not proclaiming what he had done, for he had to bear in his body the punishment of the Law. 19 Out of love he suffered so that what Adam had caused should be changed by this. 20 While his Five Attributes passed away, he did not die but was released again after his death. 21 Thus is it possible for even those who fail to live after death. 22 Through the holy wonders of the Messiah all can escape becoming ghosts. 23 All of us are saved by his works. 24 You don't need strength to receive him, but he will not leave you weak and vulnerable, without *qi* [Life Breath].

[*Sutra of the Teachings of the World-Honored One*, 3:18–24]

The otherness of this Eastern Jesus is perceived more starkly in the following example:

A Visitor came to this world uniting body and soul: He was happy in this world without troubling His spirit. 2 The union of body and soul was made by the sacred spirit of God. 3 Just as flavor creates food, so the *qi* [life breath] creates the body and soul. 4 All this comes from God. 5 Venerate God and all will be as it should be and will become clear to you. 6 Whatever you do in life will have its karmic

²⁷ The translation of this and subsequent examples is from Martin Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras*.

impact upon your soul and will affect the physical life of the soul. 7 The Visitor brought the Five Skandas and the soul together and dwelt in our world.
[*Sutra of Cause, Effect and Salvation*, 4:1–7]

The following extract has some echoes of the Johannine Jesus, but probably even stronger affinities with the kind of traditions found in the Gospel of Thomas:

At this time the Messiah taught the laws of God, of Yahweh. 2 He said: There are many different views as to the real meaning of the Sutras, and on where God is, and what God is, and how God was revealed.

3 The Messiah was orbited by the Buddhas and arhats. 4 Looking down he saw the suffering of all that is born, and so he began to teach.

5 Nobody has seen God. 6 Nobody has the ability to see God. 7 Truly, God is like the wind. 8 Who can see the wind? 9 God is not still but moves on the earth at all times. 10 He is in everything and everywhere. 11 Humanity lives only because it is filled with God's life-giving breath. 12 Peace comes only when you can rest secure in your own place, when your heart and mind rest in God. 13 Day in, day out there you exist in contentment, open to where you may be led, 14 God leads the believer to that place of contentment and great bliss.

15 All great teachers such as the Buddhas are moved by this Wind and there is nowhere in the world where this Wind does not reach and move. 16 God's Palace is in this place of peace and happiness yet he knows the suffering and actions of the whole world.

17 Everyone in the world knows how the Wind blows. 18 We can hear it but not see its shadow. 19 Nobody knows what it really looks like, whether it is pleasing to look upon or not, nor whether it is yellow, white, or even blue. 20 Nobody knows where the Wind dwells.

21 God's sacred spirit force allows him to be in one place, but where it is nobody knows, or how to get there. 22 God is beyond the cycle of death and birth, beyond being called male or female. 23 God made both Heaven and Earth. 24 God's sacred spirit force has never been fully manifested. 25 This power can grant longevity and lead to immortality.

[*Sutra of Jesus Christ*, 1:1–25]

We are closer to the synoptic traditions with the following reprise of the birth legends and the early ministry of Jesus:

So God caused the Cool Breeze to come upon a chosen young woman called Mo Yan, who had no husband, and she became pregnant. 2 The whole world saw this, and understood what God had wrought. 3 The power of God is such that it can create a bodily spirit and lead to the clear, pure path of compassion. 4 Mo Yan gave birth to a boy and called him Ye Su, who is the Messiah and whose father is the Cool Breeze. 5 Some people claimed they could not understand how this was possible, and said that if the Cool Breeze had made Mo Yan conceive, then such a child must have been created at the bottom of the world.

8 When Ye Su the Messiah was born, the whole world saw a bright mystery in the Heavens. 9 Everybody saw from their homes a star as big as a wagon wheel. 10

This mysterious light shone over the place where God was to be found, for at this time the One was born in the city of Wen-li-shih-ken [Jerusalem] in the orchard of But Lam [Bethlehem]. 11 After five years had passed the Messiah began to talk. 12 He did many miraculous and good things while teaching the Law. 13 When he was twelve he assumed the Holy Word and began teaching.

14 He came to a place of running water called Shu-Nan [Jordan] so that he might be given a name. 15 Thus he came to one called the Brother who dwelt in the wilderness and who, from his birth, had never eaten meat or drunk wine, but instead lived on vegetables and honey gathered from the wilderness.

16 At that time many people came to the Messiah, bringing gifts, and worshiped him. 17 These people were deeply troubled. 18 The Messiah went to them, bringing the precepts. 19 When he emerged from the waters the Cool Breeze visited him from Heaven and a voice proclaimed “This is my son, obey him.”

20 The Messiah showed everyone that the way of God is the way of Heaven. 21 He spoke the words of the sacred spirit, telling people to renounce evil and talking about doing good. 22 This began when he was twelve and he preached until he was thirty-two.

[*Sutra of Jesus Christ*, 5:1–5, 8–22]

If nothing else, the survival of these Gospel traditions in Chinese texts dating to the ninth century of the Common Era is a remarkable reminder of the way that Oriental Christianity engaged in mission far beyond the boundaries of the Roman world. More than that, however, we also hear the voice of a devotion to Jesus that is deeply embedded with the cultural traditions of ancient China—both Buddhist and Taoist.

The theological copyright agents of Western Christianity might accuse the author of these texts with Christological piracy, but I would argue that individuals and communities do not need to be ‘Christian’ to find real meaning in the figure of Jesus and the wisdom associated with him.

Jesus in a post-Christian world

Finally, let’s briefly address the question whether Jesus can be meaningful to people with no religious faith; or at least people who have lost a living connection with the religious community of their childhood.

I would propose an affirmative answer.

One reason for asserting this is the way that Jesus has become a global icon of sacred wisdom.

Jesus remains respected and valued even by those without religious faith, including those who have no time for organized religion or for the churches that claim an exclusive franchise on the Jesus tradition. I have come across many people who are suspicious of the churches (and often for very good reasons), as well as others who have no time for religion more generally. However, it is rare for them to express a negative estimation of Jesus.

Like some of the other great religious leaders of humanity, Jesus has a niche in the collective imagination. A contemporary secular person may not accept all the legends and religious baggage that have attached themselves to the figure of Jesus like barnacles

on the hull of a boat, but they often continue to have considerable respect for the historical figure.

I suspect this goes some way to explain the impact of the Jesus Seminar and the warm reception its findings were given in the public mind. Whether or not the reconstruction of Jesus offered by the Seminar is historically accurate, the underlying project resonates profoundly with the modern mindset.

We are deeply suspicious of religion and religious officials. We are ambivalent about claims to a spiritual dimension to reality. But we are almost naïve in our veneration of figures such as Jesus and the Buddha. The deep respect for the Dalai Lama, and even at times for the Pope, may also be an expression of this same dynamic.

In my own experience in the classroom, I have found the occasional atheist or agnostic student to be a most refreshing presence in a group of theological students. Such people are able to pursue questions without fear of the consequences for their faith, or their vocation. Since 'their Jesus' is a remarkable human being with profound insights into the human condition of his own time, they can appreciate Jesus of Nazareth in fresh and creative ways.

He can indeed function as an icon of sacred wisdom when freed from the shackles of Christology.

My final evidence for the continuing relevance of Jesus to post-religious people in the twenty-first century is the theme of this conference and our conversation here these past couple of days. What better argument could I make?

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