

Progressive Religion ... Is Not An Oxymoron

By David E. Roy

The Jesus Seminar: An Overview & Update

Several readers have asked for a column on the Jesus Seminar, a project of long personal interest to myself. The Jesus Seminar began in 1985 as a collective effort by about 150 scholars from a variety of backgrounds to determine which New Testament sayings attributed to Jesus were ones most likely to have actually been voiced by him.

Already in the framing of this pursuit, one can see some radical assumptions. The most obvious is that not everything that Jesus said according to the Christian bible necessarily reflects his views. This means that one cannot take the bible literally or even uncritically, which itself is another radical assumption.

In turn, this points the way to an understanding that the bible as we know it emerged from decades and even centuries of oral tradition. As time goes by, understandings change and therefore audiences need different kinds of explanations. In addition, even different cultures existing at the same time will need to be addressed from their own frame of reference.

The Jesus Seminar and the Quest for the Historical Jesus

The Jesus Seminar was a unique and intentionally controversial effort designed by Prof. Robert Funk, the chair of the project, in part to call public attention to the wealth of scholarship about the bible that was largely ignored by most Christian churches.¹

This vast scholarship is the outcome of decades of work done under the general theme of placing religion in an historical context by using the best scholastic and scientific tools possible. Included within this is the so-called Quest for the Historical Jesus, the English title for a book by Albert Schweitzer in the early 20th Century.

The Jesus of History vs. The Jesus of the Church

One key issue that has been pursued at least since Schweitzer is to distinguish this historical Jesus from the Jesus as defined by tradition (including the bible and the church over the millennia). The argument has been that there is a divergence between the two, quite radical in some areas.

The original scholars in the Jesus Seminar represented a variety of fields including biblical studies, linguistics, and anthropology. This group included several who have gone on to do extensive publishing and speaking to a more general audience, such as Karen Armstrong, Marcus Borg, and John Dominic Crossan.

A component of the process the Jesus Seminar followed was unique and admittedly controversial. They met together and extensively discussed their perspectives on the numerous texts (this part is not all that unique). Then, they voted!

Four Levels of Authenticity

They voted using colored marbles along the following lines:

1. Red: Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it.
2. Pink: Jesus probably said something like this.
3. Gray: Jesus did not say this, but the ideas contained in it are close to his own.
4. Black: Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective or content of a later or different tradition.

The Scandal of Scholars Voting

As one can imagine, there have been intensive criticisms of the methods and the conclusions (and even of the selection of scholars involved). As for methodology, while astronomers might vote to downgrade Pluto from a planet to a dwarf planet, biblical scholars simply do not vote. They come to their own conclusions in dialogue with their peers. But here they did vote.

Did the Seminar Diminish Jesus' Jewish Roots?

Some have criticized the seminar for diminishing Jesus' Jewish roots. An example of one of the issues at stake is the Apocalyptic atmosphere that prevailed at the time.

That is, there were many who felt that the world would be coming to an end as a result of God's actions to establish a new era of justice overcoming the inequities of that day. This included John the Baptist and the apostle Paul. However, the scholars in the seminary collectively leaned toward a non-Apocalyptic view of Jesus.

While these are certainly important issues, nonetheless the work of the seminar has had tremendous and (in my view) positive impact. The idea of a scholarly, critical approach to the bible has established a foot-hold with far more people than if this had been left to clergy alone. Further, it provides support to those church leaders who dare to challenge the status quo.

The Gospel of John: All Black

For example, from the seminar's point of view, the entire Gospel of John is seen as black. This means that none of the sayings attributed to Jesus in this book is believed to be authentic. Instead, this beautifully written gospel is understood to be entirely the work of the early church in its effort to reach a very different, Greek audience.

Therefore, some of the most troubling texts, ones that have been used to claim that only in and through Jesus can one be brought into proper alignment with God ("saved"), do not belong to Jesus. From this perspective, Christianity becomes inclusive of others instead of exclusive.

Jesus Central to Christianity but Not the Only Way

This leaves Jesus as absolutely central to the Christian faith but not as the one and only pathway to God. This is not to argue that Jesus did not reveal something unique and important about humanities' relationship with the Divine, with each other, and with the natural world, but simply that Jesus did not say that only by him can one be united with God.

Another crucial distinction is the consensus among the seminar scholars that Jesus did not proclaim himself to be the messiah (or the Christ, as derived from the Greek). Nor did he predict that he would return.

Obviously, if these very different ideas were understood and supported among the vast majority of Christians, the relationship between Christians and persons of other faith traditions, as well as secular humanists, would be much different. (The same issue is true for all “true believers,” regardless of the tradition.)

Some of the Texts Judged Most Authentic Point Toward Non-Violence and Compassion

A look at some of the passages that the seminar scholars believe are the most authentic reveals a most compelling picture of Jesus confounding his listeners while supporting the idea of non-violence and compassion.

Below are some of the top sayings (those seen by at least 70% of the scholars as something Jesus most likely said, i.e., “red”). The first three have 90% or greater support. The commentary that is in italics comes from the seminar’s publication on Jesus’ sayings (*The Five Gospels*).² Likewise, the fellows at the seminar made the translation of the texts.

1. Turn the other cheek: Don’t react violently against the one who is evil: when someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other as well. Matt 5:39 and Luke 6:29a.
2. Giving your coat & shirt: When someone wants to sue you for your shirt, let that person have your coat along with it. Matt 5:40 and Luke 6:29b.
3. The Beatitude for the poor: Congratulations, you poor! God’s domain belongs to you. Luke 6:20. (Congratulating the poor would have been unexpected since most often people congratulate those who are successful with money.)
4. Going the second mile: Further, when anyone conscripts you for one mile, go an extra mile. Matt 5:41.
5. Love of enemies: Love your enemies. Luke 6:27b
“The injunction to love enemies is ... memorable ... because it cuts against the social grain and constitutes a paradox: those who love their enemies have no enemies.” [p. 147]
6. Emperor & God: Pay the emperor what belongs to the emperor and God what belongs to God! Mark 12:17b.
7. Give to beggars: Give to the one who begs from you. Matt 5:42a.
8. The Samaritan: Luke 10:30-35 [A Judean is robbed and beaten. A priest and a Levite avoid him. A Samaritan, despite the long-standing animosity between Samaritans and Judeans, comes to the man’s aid.]
“Jesus and the legal expert engage in a dialogue in which the question is raised: who is my neighbor? ... the parable prompts [the audience] to think of the identification of their neighbor as a different ethnic group. The possibility of

another kind of social world has come into view. As a metaphorical tale that redraws the map of both the social and the sacred world, the Seminar regarded this parable as a classic example of the provocative public speech of Jesus the parabler.” [324]

9. Abba, Father. Aramaic for father in the familiar; i.e., “daddy” or “papa.” Luke 11:2b or Matt 6:9b.

These core texts, central to Jesus’ ministry as framed by the seminar (and many other scholars), point to a much different view of God than has been dominant for far longer than our age.

Instead of a God of war and revenge, the God of these texts is requiring us to make peaceful responses to aggression and unfair demands. Instead of a God who is on “our” side, God is portrayed as calling for us to see those whom we hate and fear and those whom we despise as our neighbors. Instead of a God who is remote and “lordly,” Jesus experiences God as papa, intimate and available.

Shifting from ‘Kingdom of God’ to ‘Divine Commonwealth’

It is understandings like these that lead to the kind of interpretation that theologian John B. Cobb Jr. offers concerning how Jesus understood the “Kingdom of God,” a theme that runs throughout many of his sayings: “I would prefer a translation that does not simply replace an earthly emperor with a heavenly one but points to the non-imperial character of God’s relation to people. I’ve proposed ‘divine commonwealth’, also a possible translation, instead.”³

The idea of a divine commonwealth is a powerful way of framing what the Jesus Seminar – and its underlying scholarship – makes possible with its focus on what appears to be the essential understanding of Jesus when all the layers of tradition are removed.

This also puts Jesus’ experience of God into the same general category as the best of other Abrahamic religious traditions (Judaism and Islam) as well as such traditions as Buddhism.

These traditions call humanity, all of us, to find a way to live in harmony with each other (i.e., love your neighbor); and if we are not in harmony, we are called to struggle to create that harmony, not by destroying each other, but by opening ourselves to all involved and thereby including their important uniqueness in us.

We are at the place in history where the global community must move toward the idea of a commonwealth, divine or otherwise, if we are to survive and if we are to really advance beyond our current limitations!

¹ John B. Cobb Jr., e-mail on 2/21/09.

² *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. New Translation and Commentary by Robert W. Funk, Row W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar (1993, Pleridge Press, Macmillan Publishing: New York)

³ Cobb, *ibid.*