



the empty bell

A Response to Erik Reece's "Jesus Without Miracles"

Robert A. Jonas, Ed.D., ©2005

I enjoyed reading Erik Reece's "Jesus Without Miracles" (Harper's, December)¹. The story of his father's tragic death adds a note of urgency to the topic. Though Reece admits that he is no Biblical scholar, he correctly perceives the Bible as a thicket of strange stories in which one can get found--or lost. Christians have long felt the impulse to prune the Canon and to keep only what seems sensible and wise. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries, for example, Marcion's effort to preserve only the essence of Jesus' teachings led him to reject Hebrew scriptures altogether and to retain only Paul's letters and part of Luke's Gospel. The quest to grasp the "core" of the Bible and its "real" message has sometimes been spurred, as in the case of Thomas Jefferson, by a personal struggle with the Bible and Church doctrine, and sometimes by the very public discovery and scholarly interpretation of ancient documents, such as the Oxyrhynchus and Nag Hammadi fragments and codices. Reece's article is a complex integration of his disappointment in the Bible-based Baptist faith of his father and grandfather, and his delight in what he sees as the positive religious and spiritual potential of Gnostics' writings such as the Gospel of Thomas contained in the Nag Hammadi texts.

Reece declares that "the Gospel of Thomas presents a portrait of Jesus. . . at odds with the canonical Gospels." He then lays out the threads of several different arguments to support his thesis that mainstream Christianity (and its official Canon) misrepresents who Jesus was and distorts his message. He claims, for instance, that conventional Christianity uses the idea of original sin to dis-empower and control its followers; that it directs its followers' eyes up to a fictitious heaven and hereafter rather than to the here and now; that its preoccupation with sins of the past and a heavenly future support the Hamiltonian love affair with industry that is presently ruining the planet; that its miracle stories distract and corrupt believers; that its suppression of alternative gospels was motivated by the selfish desire for power and control; and that its notions of sin, sacrifice, salvation and resurrection obliterate followers' religious empowerment.

Reece also claims that the spiritual disciplines of fasting and prayer in mainstream Christianity are mere "empty ceremony"; that the best of Jesus' teachings are those that overlap with Buddhist teachings; that the Gospel of John invents a Jesus who glories selfishly in his own divinity; that only the Gospel of Thomas tradition (and Ralph Waldo Emerson) understand the imageless and mystical dimension of Jesus' ministry; that the book of Thomas is preferable to those of Matthew and Luke because it is free of "secondary accretions" and "inventions"; that Thomas' Jesus demanded genuine ethical discipline and spoke in "maddening paradoxes," whereas John's savior Jesus expunges paradox, exudes pessimism, releases Christians from the moral life, and nails them to the wall for their inherited guilt; that for Thomas, Adam's supposed "sin" was really mere ignorance; and that, best of all, reading the Gospel of Thomas will "return us. . . to Jefferson's agrar-

¹ Erik Reece. "Jesus Without the Miracles: Thomas Jefferson's Bible and the Gospel of Thomas". Harper's Magazine, December, 2005, pp. 33-41.

ian America.”

Unfortunately, Reece argues mainly by making assertions, not by providing evidence. Reece seems unaware that many contemporary Christian theologians find in the Canon--the Bible and the doctrines that flow from the great Councils at Chalcedon and Niceae--a view of human nature that is more hopeful and inspiring than the one that Reece received as a child. They find in Scripture, for example, the vision of a God who creates human beings and the entire cosmos out of sheer love, and who charges us with the responsibility of good stewardship for the earth; a God who grants us freedom so that we can respond freely with love to our Creator and to our neighbor; a Trinitarian God in whose image we are made; and a God who, in the Incarnation, steps entirely, even bodily, into our human situation. They see at work in the Gospel stories and in Paul's Letters a Holy Spirit who was at work among the Canonical Gospel writers, who moved among the participants at the great Councils and who continues to guide us now.

Contrary to Reece's characterization, many ancient Christians who know nothing about the Gnostic Gospels contend that the Canon honors both the kataphatic (with images), bodily side of experience with a boots-on-the-ground emphasis on love and service in community, and the apophatic (without images) dimension of spiritual practice, the gnosis that comes by God's grace and that is marked by a non-conceptual, mystical and intuitive knowing. In the battles that have raged over the centuries between Canonical Christians and the Gnostics, Reece takes up the Gnostic flag with exuberant, unquestioning fanfare, failing to question Gnosticism's excessive individualism and potential elitism, as well as its distrust and denigration of the body and creation.

It is ironic that while Reece severely criticizes a literal approach to the Bible, he sees no other way to read it. Instead, his longing for spiritual depth that is truly wise, mystical and paradoxical, and his desire to be held to a high ethical standard are re-directed entirely from the Bible to the Gnostic Gospels. Reece consequently fails to see that the kingdom of God as depicted in the Canon is not only a future reality, but present now, in each moment (Mark 1: 15; Matthew 18:20; Luke 17:21; Matt 5:3; 1Cor 14:25). Reece is right to see that paradox is an essential feature of spiritual wisdom, but he fails to see that the four Gospels as a whole present the kingdom as paradoxically both already and not-yet. Reece also fails to acknowledge the many Canon parables that are rich with paradox, for example, "The last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matt 20:16); "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Matt 18:5); "The least among all of you is the greatest" (Luke 9:48). Likewise, Reece's suggestion that there is a higher ethical standard presented in Thomas Jefferson's version of the Bible and in the Gnostic Gospels seems illusory. For centuries it's been clear to millions of Christians who have found their faith in the Bible that Jesus condemned hypocrisy and the selfish accumulation of wealth ("It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter

the kingdom of God,” Matt 19:24), and held up for us a high standard for living in a community characterized by love and compassion.

It may be that Reece has been so hurt by certain fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible that he is happy to relinquish the familiar stories about the prophets and Jesus, and to savor only little gems of timeless wisdom wrenched out of context. Apparently Reece doesn’t appreciate the spiritual and imaginative gifts of story, where characters experience revelations, disasters, healings and joys over time. Apparently, he doesn’t see that, as opposed to some brands of Buddhism, and in contrast to Jefferson’s view of Jesus (the pithy wise man), Christianity’s strength is in its stories and in the real, history-making presence of the Unseen. Among Christians like myself who are involved in the Christian-Buddhist dialogue, we say proudly that we are a people of the Story, keeping in mind that every story has its shallows and its depths.

In medieval Christian theology, Gospel narratives were read on different levels, depending on the maturity of the seeker. Stories could be read literally, analogically, analogically, symbolically, mythically, and mystically. A story could be read on all levels successively or simultaneously. For Canonical Christians who are interested in knowing God (not simply in knowing about God), stories often provide a more powerful entry-point into the spiritual dimension than abstract aphorisms. A prayerful, imaginative participation in the action and the characters of Gospel stories can open the heart and mind to deeper levels of the Holy.

To take just one example, we might consider one of the Nag Hammadi fragments, #49 (see also Matthew 9:13): “The sick, not the healthy, need a doctor.” By itself, the aphorism is a kind of koan. One can sit with it and ponder its application to the spiritual life. This is good. But now consider the same message in the context of Matthew’s setting.

9:9 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. 10 And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” 12 But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

In this familiar story Jesus is sitting with cultural outcasts, with tax collectors and “sinners,” the people normally avoided by “good,” religious folk. The narrative context of the embedded aphorism shows Jesus overturning the purity taboos, opening up the spiritual life to everyone, and proclaiming that the Sabbath was made for human beings, rather

than the other way around. These levels of meaning vanish if we cling only to the aphorism and lose the story into which it was woven.

Reece also questions the authorship of the Gospels and Epistles. He is correct in asserting that stories such as the Matthew one above were put together by flesh-and-blood people who may or may not have actually seen, heard and touched Jesus of Nazareth. But historians would argue that they were, at least, compiled by those close to Jesus, perhaps by friends of friends and that they were not mere “accretions” or self-serving “inventions” as Reece suggests. One can argue that the Gospel stories were shared, memorized, and changed in the re-telling via a process that Christians call discernment or “listening in the Spirit.” One can trust that the Holy Spirit spoken of by Jesus is real and that the Gospel stories and the various Epistles were written by community members who were inspired by the Holy Spirit, or not. Just because Jesus did not write the Gospels himself there is no reason to conclude, as Reece suggests, that the Gospel writers composed their books out of narrow self-interest and foisted them on the community as a power play.

One can argue, in contrast to Reece, that the Canon’s narratives and miracle stories, as well as the parables and pithy wisdom statements of Jesus, have carried inspiration, hope, and creative power to generations of believers. When hearing, telling, and pondering these stories is combined with spiritual disciplines such as personal prayer and communal liturgy, and when these practices are carried out from the depths of one’s heart and soul, they are not, as Reece says, “mere empty ceremony” but vehicles of God’s presence.

The particular brand of Protestantism with which Mr. Reece grew up has apparently prevented him from discovering some of the riches of the wider Christian tradition. The wisdom that Mr. Reece claims as the exclusive province of Gnostic texts can be found in the mystical and contemplative dimension of the Canon and doctrines of the pre-Reformation Church.

For example, the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches -- without benefit of Thomas’ Gospel -- understand the Incarnation as a message about divinization. As St. Irenaeus (130-200 C.E.) put it, “God became human so that humans might become divine.” It is too bad that for Christians like Reece, the Reformation has almost totally obliterated the great ancient Christian teachings regarding divinization, contemplative prayer, apophatic theology, theosis, and the mystery of transfiguration in Christ that were carried for centuries in both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions. But these teachings are a critical resource for understanding and for living out the wisdom of the Canon.

Finally, we should be skeptical of Reece’s portrayal of the Canonical Jesus. For example, according to Reece, the Jesus we meet in the Gospel of John is a narcissist who inhales the admiration of his friends, who tries to quench any spark of divinity that his fol-

lowers may possess, and who lures them to focus only on “the sweet hereafter.”

In fact, the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican traditions have always honored John’s Gospel as the most mystical of the four, the one in which Jesus discusses the intuitive spiritual treasures that are revealed when one lives with faith in the Risen Christ. John’s Jesus shares everything he has -- his power, his glory, his intimacy with God, his joy. Rather than claiming a superior status, he declares, “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends” (John 15:15); and “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11). It is John, not Thomas, who utters some of the most intimate lines of love that humankind has ever heard. Jesus says to both God and friends, “That where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:3); “The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these” (John 14:12); “I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (John 14:20); “So that they may be one, as we are one” (John 17:11 & 22). He prays to God for his friends, asking that “The love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26).

I celebrate Mr. Reece’s quest to honor the life and teachings of Jesus and to articulate a more life-giving faith than the one he inherited from his father and grandfather. I hope he will begin to claim the wider inheritance of the Christian tradition rather than to replace one narrow reading of Scripture with another.

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