



the empty bell

Response to Stephen Mitchell's Gospel According to Jesus

A Book Review by Robert A. Jonas, Ed.D., ©1996
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Thank you for Mark Barna's provocative interview with author Stephen Mitchell (*The Gospel According to Jesus*, *Book of Psalms*, *Book of Job*, *The Enlightened Heart*) in your last issue. Mitchell's translations of Hebrew, German and Chinese poetry and sacred prose are wonderful. However, as a Christian in the contemplative tradition (as in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches), I want to express my dismay at Mitchell's reading of Christian scripture.

The 1993 Council for a Parliament of World Religions signaled a new commitment to interfaith understanding by leaders of all the great faiths. The Council's vision for interfaith dialogue is based on mutual respect, compassionate curiosity about real and apparent differences, empathy, experimentation with common liturgies, and the joint study of sacred scriptures. Mitchell violates most of these fine principles in his *The Gospel According to Jesus*. Recently, after re-reading this work, I complained to my wife about Mitchell's unexamined Buddhist and atheistic stereotypes of Christians. In a flash of Zen insight, she said simply, "What is the sound of one ax grinding?" We shared a hearty laugh.

Here are a few of my objections to *The Gospel According to Jesus*. According to Mitchell, the purpose of his work is to locate the "essential teachings" and authentic words of Jesus. When the rest of the New Testament (NT) is jettisoned--the Gospel narratives and all the epistles--Mitchell claims that we will find a Jesus whose teachings are identical to those of wise teachers in all the great religions. There may be some truth in this generous impulse. But Mitchell's approach completely misses the real power of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

As Mitchell explains, following the work of the Jesus Seminar, many supposed "quotations" of Jesus were actually formulated and written by unknown Gospel authors of the first century. I think that Mitchell finds this fact shocking, partly because he fails to appreciate the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian faith. NT authors collected their material from stories that circulated by oral tradition. These writers arranged and added to this material in light of their own experience of the Holy Spirit, and the needs of their particular faith communities. For contemplative Christians, the Gospels are authentic because they contain not only the actual words of Jesus, but also because they are written by faithful witnesses and believers who were inspired by Jesus's living Spirit.

It is important to note that Stephen Mitchell is an agnostic, perhaps atheistic Jewish-Buddhist, what author Rodger Kamenetz (*The Jew in the Lotus*) calls a "JUBU." In Mitchell's account of Jesus's life, there is no God and no resurrection of the dead; there are no miracles, few healings, and no angels or demons. His materialistic/psychological approach completely disregards the power of faith to convey truth. For instance, Mitchell uses Thomas Jefferson as a source for understanding Christian scripture. This is a bit like using the Pope as a source for understanding Buddhism. Jefferson was a typical product of the Enlightenment, a non-Christian who sought to strip the Gospels of soul, divinity and

mystical reality, and to make human reason god. Mitchell's method of critiquing Christian texts by consulting only the "inner evidence" of his intuition, is occasionally interesting, but one wonders why he doesn't simply ask Christians about their own experience, in their own terms. His arrogant, and contentious approach lacks empathic curiosity of those who are different than himself.

Mitchell's non-Christian assumptions follow from the worldviews of Marx and Freud, who for different reasons dismissed all religious and mystical experience as neurotic projections of the human psyche. Thus, according to Mitchell, when NT authors speak about angels and demons, they are projecting their own human fears and wishes onto imaginary beings: according to Mitchell, the angel who speaks to Joseph in a dream is merely one of Joseph's own "inner voices". This is a mistake. Mitchell's reduction of our interior life to a self-enclosed exchange of inner voices precludes other interesting, postmodern interpretations. For example, isn't it possible that when Joseph dreams that an angel speaks to him, he is not only opening to his unconscious mind, but also to a sacred dimension of human experience? Isn't it possible that sometimes our inner experience is iconic and revelatory of a dimension that goes beyond the simply human?

Mitchell seems to fancy himself as a Freudian psychiatrist who puts Jesus, and all Christians, on the couch. "What's all this stuff about your Father in heaven?" the psychiatrist wants to know. "Tell me about your real father." And soon, predictably, we find out that the reason that Jesus is so intensely focused on God as "Father" is because he is an illegitimate child. He is merely projecting his emotional need for a real father onto this anthropomorphic Abba. Now, this approach is not all bad. Even though Christian tradition declares that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, many Christians have lost touch with Jesus's humanness. In this sense, Mitchell's search for the peasant Jesus is refreshing and helpful.

But the psychiatrist Mitchell gets carried away into something of a paranoid frenzy. His Gospel is replete with the sort of judgmentalism that we psychotherapists call "psycho-bombing." Thus, we are supposed to believe that the first century Gospel writers are trying to get away with a thinly veiled "masquerade." Their Jesus is not only "unbalanced," but actually "schizophrenic." The Resurrection is a sentimental "fairy tale," a "poignant whistling in the dark, in which Jesus appears as an insubstantial ghost of himself." The Holy Trinity is not a spiritual reality at all, but rather Jesus's absent biological father, his faithful, doting mother, and himself. In the end, it turns out that Jesus was an earnest, brilliant young man, but nothing more, a mere mortal whose ministry, while important and powerful, amounted to "to a resolution of his own family drama."

In all this trashing of the Christian scriptures, Mitchell imagines that he is doing us Christians a service. In his Gospel, he condescends to tell us that he knows how difficult

it will be to see things his way, “to let go of our pieties, those small, familiar, comfortable alcoves which we enter when we need to be consoled or reassured that the world is safe.” Ironically, Mitchell’s own account of reality is astonishingly tiny. Anyone who disagrees with his version of Jesus is “narrow-minded” or worse. In one arrogant flourish of the pen, Martin Luther King’s messianic vision, is reduced to “benign insanity.” I am afraid that one of Mitchell’s unspoken motivations is to shame Christians into his supposedly more intellectually defensible worldview.

I also object to the way that Mitchell singles out NT authors for his harangue. Why does he not take on the authors of his own Hebrew or Buddhist scriptures? In the Shambhala Sun interview, Mitchell is willing to go below the surface reading of the sacrifice of Isaac story in the Hebrew Bible, but he dismisses outright the possibility of a deeper reading of Jesus’s apparent judgmentalism in Mark 16. Why the double standard? Also, Mitchell has done a beautiful translation of the Book of Job, but nowhere does he suggest taking away all those scenes which did not come directly from the real Job’s mouth. Nor does he use this method of textual analysis for the “authentic” words of Abraham, Isaac, David, Samuel, Rachel, Rebecca, or God. Did God really say “I Am,” and give Moses the tablets of stone? If not, is Mitchell prepared to dump the whole story? Likewise, is Mitchell ready to weed out all those stories (sutras) attributed to the Buddha which, it turns out, Shakyamuni Buddha never uttered? Is he prepared to psychoanalyze Prince Siddhartha Gautama, who left his wife and child to meditate? And is Mitchell prepared to tell the Dalai Lama that his experience of the trikaya (with its transcendent buddhas), the heaven and hell realms and reincarnation are all mere fairy tale? Why does he single out Christian texts for his hatchet job?

Finally, at the beginning of *The Gospel*, Mitchell declares that Jesus taught only one thing: presence. I agree that more Christians should realize the grace available in each present Now. But in fact, Jesus taught other equally essential truths, such as the reality of God, the path of faith, hope and love, and the power of the Holy Spirit. Mitchell envisions Jesus in his maturity as always calm and wise, never angry, and never making reference to the future. In his Shambhala Sun interview, he would have Jesus, and us, look out at the holocaust in “perfect repose.” But in stripping Jesus of prophesy and passion, he negates some of the most beautiful legacies of the Judaeo-Christian tradition--our sense of history, and our capacity for holy grief, anger and repentance.

For Mitchell, anger can only be a sign of immature attachment. If Jesus is angry, then he must be “schizophrenic,” and if he is angry at hypocritical authorities, he must be anti-Semitic. Anger, such as the anger that Mitchell displays toward Christians, can indeed be petty and judgmental. In fact, history shows that inflammatory rhetoric such as Mitchell’s has sometimes contributed to religious pogroms and war. But anger can also have a deeper source and direction. For example, in my recent book, *Rebecca: A Father’s Journey from*

Grief to Gratitude (Crossroad, 1996), I explore the ways in which anger, properly understood and expressed, can have a sacred dimension, and play an essential role in the spiritual transformation of our planet.

Mitchell's approach to interfaith dialogue is basically to collapse the truths of other religious traditions into his own version of Buddhism, and to mock and dismiss what he doesn't understand. He seems to think that taking pot shots at Christians across the fence is equivalent to honest, mutually vulnerable dialogue. It is not.

