Advice for Religious Historians: On the Myth of a Purely Historical Jesus

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Advice for Religious Historians: On the Myth of a Purely Historical Jesus

ALAN G. PADGETT

Once again Western thought has turned to the 'historical Jesus', both in the popular media and in many academic volumes speeding from the presses. A 'Third Quest' for the historical Jesus has begun, and the so-called Jesus Seminar has produced a new version of the Gospels, the 'Scholars Version' of The Five Gospels, dedicated to Galileo (among others). Such general interest in historical scholarship provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the legitimacy of this enterprise, and indeed, to reflect on the character of our academic approach to religious studies. In this essay I will pursue two goals at once. First, I wish to debunk a powerful and influential myth, arising from the Enlightenment divorce of religion and science, which assumes that a purely neutral, value-free 'scientific' approach to the historical Jesus is desirable and possible. Second, I hope to provide an alternative, post-modern approach which integrates faith and science, as indeed the real Galileo did.

1 R. Funk, R. W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus (New York: Macmillan, 1993). By the 'Jesus Seminar' I will always mean the corporate authors of this book and its introduction. I am not talking about the scholars as individuals, many of whom I know and respect. For a good introduction to the work of the Jesus Seminar and the 'Third Quest' for this historical Jesus, see Marcus Borg, Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity, 1993).

2 In this essay I use 'science' in a very broad sense, as it is used in Latin (scientia), Greek (epistemē), and German (Wissenschaft), to refer to any academic, rigorous enquiry that is based upon evidence, reason, and argument. I do not reduce 'science' to mean the natural sciences, as many Americans do.

3 Mine is a mild sort of post-modernism. By 'post-modern' I only mean a view that is critical of the Enlightenment. Relativism is not implied in this term as I use it. After completing this essay, I discovered that my basic thesis is advocated by Robert Morgan in his contribution to the G. B. Caird memorial volume, 'The Historical Jesus and the Theology of the New Testament', in L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright (eds.), The Glory of Christ in the New Testament (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 187–206. However,
Like earlier theologians reflecting on the problem of faith and history, such as Alan Richardson, Richard R. Niebuhr, and Wolfhart Pannenberg, I have found that reflection upon the early Christian claim that Jesus rose from the dead is a powerful place from which to consider the relationship between faith and historical research.\(^4\) I will propose no new interpretation of the data, but rather reflect on the very practice of historiography in the face of the historical claim that Jesus rose from the dead. I hope to show, furthermore, that reflection on the difference between historical and theological explanation clarifies the sense in which the resurrection is a ‘historical’ event.

At one time in our Western universities we were certain of how history should proceed, as a rigorous, value-free, scientific discipline. But that era is now over. How shall we now proceed? Does ‘anything go’ in historical research now that modernity is over? How shall we understand the discipline of religious history in a post-positivist, post-modern situation? For modernity, with its faith in reason and its myth of neutral, scientific scholarship, is well and truly dead. \textit{Requiescet in pace.}

We stand at the end of the twentieth century asking much the same question as religious thinkers at the end of the nineteenth century in Europe: what is the right method by which to approach the history of religion? The answer given in particular by that brilliant German scholar Ernst Troeltsch is this: the proper method for the study of religion is a purely scientific historiography that is value-


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free and religiously neutral. I have traced this answer and this method back to its sources in Western intellectual history. This 'purely historical' approach to religion was first applied specifically to Jesus. The argument of scholars like H. S. Reimarus, David Strauss, and William Wrede was that the only proper, scholarly approach to Jesus was a purely historical, purely scientific one that rejected all religious belief as distorting and unscientific. Because the Enlightenment was a Western movement, and because Christianity was the dominant religion of the West, the Enlightenment was forced to answer the question of what a proper, scholarly, 'enlightened' approach to Jesus was. Their answer, which is followed by the Jesus Seminar, I am going to label 'the myth of a purely historical Jesus'.

I am going to use the specific issue of the resurrection of Jesus as a basis for examining the myth of a purely historical approach to religious studies. The resurrection is a fascinating claim made by early Christians, for it is at once both a claim about history and a claim about religious truth. How then shall we academics, we 'scientific' investigators of religion, approach such a claim?

One easy and common answer is quite simple: dismiss the claim at once as impossible, and perhaps begin a historical and sociological investigation of why early Christians would create such a mythological tale. After all, we all know (don't we?) that dead people stay dead, and that resurrections are in fact scientifically impossible. This is the approach of Rudolf Bultmann and his followers, along with the vast majority of academics in religious studies today. This easy and common response to the claim that Jesus actually rose from the dead points to something important: the role

5 See his essay, 'Historiography', in J. Hastings (ed.), Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), vi. 716–23. Troeltsch's philosophy of history is in fact very nuanced. He rejected the certainty of historical judgement, arguing that world-views and historical science are sometimes in tension. Nevertheless, for Troeltsch as I read him, scientific historiography is an absolute value, arising within a particular context, that all academics should adopt qua academics. See further his Religion in History, trans. J. L. Adams and W. E. Bense (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991). So even when he is striving 'to recognize an influence of faith on science', Troeltsch cannot help but write, 'the empirical sciences in themselves are wholly independent of faith and follow their own laws' (p. 130).

of presuppositions and bias in historiography. This influence of world-views upon academic and scientific investigation has many names, and is widely believed today. Any quest for knowledge, and considerations of argument and evidence, will be biased by the investigator’s world-view. For want of a better name, I will call this ‘the prejudice of perspective’. Bultmann himself would agree with us, of course. In a famous paper he asked: ‘Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?’ The right answer, of course, is ‘No’, and this was indeed Bultmann’s answer, much to his credit. My problem with Bultmann is that he imports presuppositions that are antithetical to Christian faith, especially those that lie behind the myth of a purely historical Jesus.

I THE MYTH EXPOSED

Behind the myth is a basic assumption we need to examine: that religious faith corrupts scientific research. This powerful and attractive ideology in Western culture is still responsible for much of the rhetoric in biblical and religious studies about ‘scholarly’ approaches to our topic. For example, the Jesus Seminar shows its arrogance and prejudice in this false claim: ‘The Christ of creed and dogma, who had been firmly in place in the Middle Ages, can no longer command the assent of those who have seen the heavens through Galileo’s telescope.’ In my analysis of this myth, I have discovered three underlying assumptions:

(1) That religious faith distorts scientific, critical scholarship.
(2) Because this is true, the only proper, academic, scientific methodology in religious studies is one that rejects religious faith itself.


8 The English translation of this paper is found in R. Bultmann, Existence and Faith, ed. S. Ogden (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1960), 289–98.


10 Funk et al. (eds.), Five Gospels, 2.
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(3) That a purely historical, scientific, faith-free and value-neutral methodology is available to us in what we might broadly call the social-scientific disciplines.

I will argue that each of these ideas is false, and, even more, that this ideology as a whole is deluding and distorts the quest for truth about religion. Finally, the myth of a purely historical and faith-free approach to religion is part of an ideology which is destructive of human flourishing, because it seeks to separate faith and values on the one hand and science and reason on the other.

Troeltsch, Wrede, and their many followers were working against another, earlier approach to religious history, called the dogmatic method or 'apologetics' in the negative sense of these terms. In this method, one assumes the truth of a religion, and then finds this truth in the historical sources (surprise!). This kind of vicious circular reasoning can in fact prove anything to be true. So I completely agree with modernity and its rejection of the earlier, dogmatic approach to religious history. Furthermore, I do believe that we must continue to study religions in an academic, scholarly way that accepts criticism and argument as necessary correctives to our biases and prejudices. I do not want to be heard as suggesting that we throw out rigorous, scientific research. The canons of historical criticism are a lasting contribution to our civilization. My concern is not with our methods, but rather with our attitudes toward them and toward religious faith. I want to examine the myth of a purely historical Jesus, and consider its shortcomings. I will suggest that we must replace this attractive and powerful ideology (the 'myth') with one that is more humble, holistic, and accepting of religious belief.

Such a claim obviously needs substantiation, so we will look at the basic assumptions of the myth. First of all, supposedly, Christian faith distorts the quest for a purely historical Jesus. The Jesus Seminar participants, and many others intend to 'liberate' Jesus research from the 'oppression' of dogmatism. For example, Ed Sanders in his book Jesus and Judaism writes that 'I have been engaged for some years in the effort to free history and exegesis from the control of theology' and 'I aim only [...] to be a historian and an exegete'.\textsuperscript{11} Both aims are, alas, impossible, for we simply substitute one 'theology' (or 'mythology' as Burton Mack calls it) for another!

\textsuperscript{11} E. P. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 333 f.
The myth of a purely historical Jesus helps the exegete fool herself about this substitution (that is particularly obvious in the work of the Jesus Seminar\textsuperscript{12}).

Because of the prejudice of perspective there is no such thing as a purely historical, value-free, neutral scientific approach to the historical Jesus. Indeed, I would argue that there is no purely historical, value-free, neutral scientific approach to any great religious figure or controversial person from the past. The truth of this point is made clear by a controversial (but hardly religious) figure known to all of us: Richard Nixon. If you watch the Oliver Stone film Nixon and follow it with a visit to the Nixon Library, you find yourself asking, ‘Will the real Richard Nixon please stand up?’ And it is very obvious that the political biases of both the Nixon Library and Oliver Stone have influenced their quite distinct interpretations of the real Nixon of history. If the prejudice of perspective is true for our interpretation of Nixon—a very famous leader in our own country and our own time, about whom many, many facts are known—imagine how much more it must influence our treatment of Jesus or, for that matter, Buddha or Confucius.

The myth of a purely historical Jesus, of course, has had tremendous cultural appeal, especially among academics, for some time now. For almost 200 years academics have sought this El Dorado, this powerful but ultimately elusive and deluding mythology, and like De Soto have often lost their way. I am not suggesting that no important advances have been made in the quest for the historical Jesus; they have. Rather, my point is that this mythology of a purely neutral, faith-free approach has deluded scholars concerning the importance, character, and meaning of their results.

I will examine two versions of this myth, and criticize each one. The first version I call ‘the neutrality two-step’ in which the prejudice of perspective is recognized, but then we try and step around it back into scientific neutrality. For the ‘neutrality two-step’ version of the myth, the problem of perspective is a problem only for faith—no for the scientific, rational scholar who of course has no faith! A second version of the myth is one I call ‘the consensus Jesus’, in

\textsuperscript{12} For a good critique of the work of the Seminar, see Luke T. Johnson, \textit{The Real Jesus} (San Francisco: Harper, 1995). I agree with much of what Johnson has to say, but in the end his own view still divides faith and science. Our spiritual knowledge of the real, risen Jesus must be subject to critical, scientific reflection and historical examination (I do not say historical ‘verification’—I agree with Johnson that such verification is impossible for historical science).
which a consensus theory of truth is supposed to lead us to the real Jesus of history.

I will start with the most important version of the myth, the neutrality two-step. Many scholars today are sophisticated enough to realize that hermeneutic theory, epistemology, and the philosophy of science all converge at one point: namely, what I have called the prejudice of perspective. A purely neutral science is both undesirable and not possible in the first place. Having recognized the prejudice of perspective, however, scholars still seem to hope that our biases and prejudices can be overcome through careful religious neutrality and scientific method. Let us pay attention to the facts and hope that all this interpretation stuff goes away, they seem to be saying. As long as we focus on the right methodology, are rigorously sceptical of the sources, and are as neutral and scientific as possible, excluding religious presuppositions, then the prejudice of perspective will not affect our results. This, of course, is simply self-delusion of the part of scholars.

An example of the neutrality two-step would be the work of either Ed Sanders or Burton Mack. For both men, 'theology' is a bad word, and theological commitments tend to distort and warp neutral, scientific research. That their own world-views distort and warp their own work is, of course, equally obvious, at least to us. For all of us approach our work with some sort of faith stance. Mack and Sanders have their own agendas, which distort their interpretations of Jesus, as does the Jesus Seminar.

Another example of the neutrality two-step would be Gary Habermas, a conservative apologist. He writes: 'The best approach to take towards history is one of caution, as we should try and recognize this subjective bias and then make the proper allowance

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13 The separation of faith from science is the major problem I have with Peter Carnley's otherwise excellent book The Structure of Resurrection Belief (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). Carnley wants to add to pure scientific facts about Jesus a mythopoetic appropriation of the Spirit of Christ by faith (see pp. 352-8). The fusion of faith and science I have in mind presumes Christian faith in the midst of careful scientific work.

for it.' This sentence is an almost perfect example of what I mean by the neutrality two-step, in fact. Of course, Habermas and other apologists have their agenda, too, and want history to be neutral so that they can use it to prove that Christianity is true. Allow me one final example: Willi Marxsen, a follower of Bultmann and a well-known New Testament scholar, defines 'the historical Jesus' as 'Jesus before anyone has ventured an interpretation of him'. This might be the true Jesus, but it is hardly the historical Jesus. Of course no such Jesus can be known, for the knowing process is itself an interpretation.

The neutrality two-step is close to being right. I agree that religious and historical claims must be subject to critical, scientific examination. The fundamental flaw in the neutrality two-step is this: all data is already infected by theory. World-views don't just give us the questions we ask; they also affect our understanding of the evidence and our historical judgement. There just is no such thing as data apart from some interpretation. The question of what counts as 'evidence' or 'data' is already biased by our prior interests, theories, and world-views. So the neutrality two-step just trips us up as we reflect upon the relationship between faith and science.

The neutrality two-step is also self-deluding. It leads to a bias against theological commitments in historical science, without recognizing the distorting elements in the researcher's own worldview. The rhetoric of the Jesus Seminar is a good example of what I mean by the self-deluding character of myth.

The best-known and most sophisticated version of the neutrality two-step is found in a book dedicated to Professor Bultmann, Van Harvey's The Historian and the Believer. Harvey develops a 'morality of knowledge' in which the religious faith of the believing historian so distorts and warps her judgement that the validity of her reasoning process is called into question. Harvey's book downplays two important factors: first, the secular unbeliever is just as distorted and warped by his prejudice and worldview as the believer is; second, who is to say that Christian faith does not give us better

16 W. Marxsen, Jesus and Easter, trans. V. P. Furnish (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 16. Of course Marxsen is not a slavish follower of Bultmann, and disagrees with him on several points (these are helpfully outlined in G. O'Collins, Jesus Risen (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1987), 65 f.).
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insight into the data than unbelief does? Why should unbelief, rather than faith, lead to the best explanation of the evidence? Would it be so strange if the followers of Jesus have an inside track in the understanding of Jesus? Why is faith so damaging to reason, anyway?

Granted that faith is a kind of prejudice, perhaps it is a helpful prejudice. Helpful prejudices can give us insight into data, and clear the way for understanding. For example, the planet Neptune was discovered because of prejudice on the part of astronomers in favour of classical mechanics. And the Marxist prejudice of liberation theologians has helped us to see what the Bible really does say about poverty and liberation. As Gadamer has argued, we all stand in some tradition, and have some prejudice, when we approach the task of interpretation.\(^1\) Not all tradition and prejudice is bad: some can be helpful. All reasoning is based upon some prejudice; all insight and research takes place from a particular position, and in the light of a particular world-view and tradition of enquiry. There is ‘no view from nowhere’ to borrow a phrase from Thomas Nagel.\(^2\)

The question of whether a certain prejudice is helpful or harmful in the evaluation of evidence cannot be decided a priori as Harvey wants it to be.\(^3\) It is only in the give and take of dialogue and in the evaluation of reasons, arguments, and evidence that our pre-understanding will be found to be helpful or harmful. I am not suggesting that we abandon rational enquiry or scientific historiography. Nor do I suggest that biblical scholarship return to the Christian dogmatism of a previous age. Rather, I suggest that the myth of a neutral, scientific history, which Harvey assumes throughout his book, distorts the relationship between faith (or lack of it!) and historical research. The casual dismissal of the claim that Jesus may indeed have risen from the dead is not a helpful prejudice, for it is founded upon a fallacious conception of natural

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\(^3\) See e.g. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, 213. All of Harvey’s discussion of ‘hard and soft persuasivism’ is interesting just because he misunderstands the point being made that there are no objective standards of historical reasoning. Note his prejudice in favour of ‘what any historian would accept as a legitimate claim’ (p. 218), or again, ‘events that are otherwise known in the way any event can be known’ (p. 242).
science and the ‘laws’ of nature (which are purely descriptive, not prescriptive). It is no accident that Van Harvey’s book is dedicated to Professor Bultmann, and perpetuates the misunderstanding of faith and science one finds in Bultmann and his school.

The implications of the myth of a purely historical Jesus are in fact a road-block to historical knowledge of the real Jesus. For it is part of the myth that religious faith distorts our knowledge of reality. Since the New Testament is written, in part, from a faith perspective, it must be questioned at every turn. For example, in his book *A Future for the Historical Jesus*, Leander Keck writes (correctly in my view) that ‘every believer and every theologian has central things at stake in the historical study of Jesus’.21 I applaud Keck’s rejection of the attempt to divorce faith and science, characteristic of the Bullmann school. But when Keck insists that ‘a skeptical attitude toward the sources’ is necessary, he has obviously bought into the myth of a purely historical Jesus.22 Why is a sceptical attitude necessary? Only because, as a hidden premiss, we must doubt any historical claim that could come from a faith perspective. But all historical writing comes from a faith perspective. We must, indeed, accept a critical attitude toward all historical sources and artefacts. But a critical attitude which looks for reasons and evidence is not the same thing as a sceptical attitude, based upon a prejudice against religious faith in the sources. Such a scepticism, the ‘guilty until proved innocent’ modern attitude toward the New Testament, actually blocks good historical research. Once again we can cite the Jesus Seminar:23 ‘methodological skepticism’ was a working principle of the Seminar; ‘when in sufficient doubt, leave it out’. In fact the Seminar seems to work on the principle, ‘when there is any doubt, leave it out’. There is much we can learn historically from the New Testament, but not if we insist on doubting every line of it until we can prove it to be true. In logic, we would call this the fallacy of ‘poisoning the well’. In the history of philosophy, it represents Descartes’ approach to epistemology, and that is a blind alley. So, ironically, the myth of a purely historical Jesus ends up distorting what the very quest for the true Jesus was created to assist. Such is the human condition!

Another version of the myth of a purely historical Jesus is the ‘consensus Jesus’. Once again, some scholars recognize the

22 Ibid. 21.
23 Funk et al. (eds.), *Five Gospels*, 37.
prejudice of perspective, but then try to dance around it. In this version, they hope that a consensus of New Testament scholars will provide us with the ‘true’ Jesus of history. A brilliant example of this method, which I admire very much, is *A Marginal Jew*, by John Meier. While Meier’s historical judgement is excellent, and his scholarship and knowledge are profound, his presentation of method is quite flawed. To see why this is so, let us first make some distinctions in our terminology. By ‘the true Jesus’, ‘the real Jesus’, or ‘the Jesus of history’ I will mean Jesus of Nazareth as he really was in the past. However, by ‘the historical Jesus’ I will follow common usage and understand these terms to designate Jesus as we can know him through historical research. Finally, by ‘consensus Jesus’ I will understand the Jesus who is known to us through a consensus of current New Testament scholarship.

There is very little hope that the consensus Jesus will yield to us the real Jesus. This is so for both theoretical and practical reasons. As any first-year philosophy student knows, the consensus theory of truth is bogus. Just because a group of humans think something is true does not make it true. At the practical end, we always have to ask the critical or Marxist question: who defines the consensus? The so-called consensus of the Jesus Seminar is obviously based upon personalities and a priori ideology, as anyone who is aware of the history and personalities behind the group knows. Or again, in his very interesting book *The Quest for a Post-Historical Jesus*, William Hamilton tells us that there is a consensus among current scholars that no historical knowledge of the real Jesus is possible. As a factual statement about the academy of biblical scholarship, this ‘consensus’ is obviously false. I am afraid that the consensus Jesus will yield us nothing, and cannot lead to any sound, scientific results about history, or indeed about any scientific topic.

Now consensus is important, of course, in many areas of life. We are wise to rely upon a consensus of experts, when there is such, for topics in which we are not well versed ourselves. But in our own areas of expertise, scientific investigators must ignore the ‘consensus’ in favour of the evidence and arguments themselves. At best, a consensus might provide a beginning for our own careful examination of the issues. Unlike the Jesus Seminar, which is ‘pop’

scholarship, Meier is better than the methodology he espouses. Like so many other scholars, he is aware of the prejudice of perspective, but does not realize the implications of this prejudice for his own work. He writes, 'we abstract from Christian faith because we are involved in the hypothetical reconstruction of a past figure by purely scientific means'. In another place he indicates that, 'to be sure, A Marginal Jew works with presuppositions, but they are the general presuppositions of historiography.

The point that must be made against the 'consensus Jesus' version of the myth of a purely historical Jesus is that our presuppositions are pluralistic, and that they inevitably influence our gathering of the data, our grasp of what counts as 'evidence', and our interpretation of that evidence. None of the natural or historical sciences has as criteria or indices of truth a consensus among investigators, and for very good reasons. We may try to be as reasonable and rational as possible, but we cannot escape from our own prejudices. And since our perspectives are so pluralistic, the consensus Jesus becomes a minimalist Jesus. If we were really to base a book on Jesus just upon what all, or 90 per cent, of 75 per cent (how shall we define 'consensus'?) of what all New Testament scholars agree upon, the resulting book would be a lot shorter than A Marginal Jew! And honestly, of what scientific value would such a purely sociological study be? At best it might give us a starting-point for our own investigations, based upon our own faith and our own methods, but we would still have to reinvestigate each point for ourselves. And this consensus Jesus would be a jaundiced, emasculated Jesus, for there are so few facts we can all agree on. The consensus Jesus is not even the historical Jesus, much less the real Jesus of history.

I hope I have said enough to indicate that the myth of the purely historical Jesus is a false ideology imposed upon religious studies by the Enlightenment. It is self-deluding, and it also distorts the attempt to come to know the real Jesus. The myth 'poisons the well' with respect to the only significant sources we have to study the historical Jesus. Now it is certainly true that a dogmatic method, which presumes the results of critical enquiry before the give and take of evidence, argument, and reasoning takes place, is destructive of true critical scholarship. But religious faith does not have to lead to

26 Meier, Marginal Jew, i. 30 ff; my italics. 27 Ibid. ii.
dogmatism of this kind, and it often does not. I have met many dogmatic atheists, who arrogantly assume that scientific materialism is the only rational world-view, and that Christian theology is just another kind of ancient myth. Belief that all truth is God’s truth, that God is the maker of heaven, earth, and my neighbour, can and does lead to open enquiry, toleration, understanding, and careful scholarship. Adolf Schlatter would be a good example of this in New Testament studies. Moreover, have we forgotten that the founders of natural science were men of faith? For Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Newton belief in a rational Creator was a fundamental assumption for the scientific quest. So the first assumption of the myth, that religious faith corrupts scientific research, is both false as an idea, and self-deluding as an ideology. It allows researchers to believe about themselves—falsely, of course—that their own faith stance and their own world-view do not corrupt their research.

The assumption, left over from Enlightenment prejudice, that religious faith corrupts science is self-deluding, and it distorts the quest for religious truth; but finally, it is part of the divorce between science and faith. The idea that the only proper approach to religion is one that ignores or brackets religious faith is part of an overall attempt to ‘free’ science from the ‘biases’ of religion and morality, an idea we can trace to the French encyclopedists. And this divorce has been destructive in our own century, to our own people. It leads to bad religion, and to bad science and technology. Who wants a religion divorced from reason, or scientific experiments and application that ignore moral truth? We know now that science and technology are not autonomous realms, free from such biases as respect for life and love for people of other cultures and classes. I would like to point out that the myth of a purely historical Jesus is part of the overall attempt to separate faith and moral values from science. This attempt has been destructive to the human race, to religious faith, to good scientific methods, and to the environment. Science and technology, divorced from religious wisdom and moral values, constitute not only a myth, but the nightmare of the twentieth century.
II Toward a Dialogue between Faith and Science

I have indicated several reasons for dropping the self-deluding myth of a purely historical approach to religious studies. But if we drop this ideology, what shall replace it? This, I think, is the major reason why so many scholars continue to have faith in the myth. They feel that if they drop the idea of a purely neutral, value-free approach, then history will be left in a quagmire of subjectivity. To quote from Meier again, 'Whether we call it a bias, a Tendenz, a worldview, or a faith stance, everyone who writes on the historical Jesus writes from some ideological vantage point; no critic is exempt. The solution to this dilemma is neither to pretend to an absolute objectivity that is not to be had nor to wallow in total relativism.'

Notice two things in this quotation: first, that a faith stance creates a dilemma for the historian, and second, the fear of relativism if we drop the myth of a purely historical Jesus. In fact, Meier accepts here some version of the neutrality two-step: let us admit our bias, follow a rigorous methodology, and try to be as objective and religion-neutral as possible. But this assumes, all along, that faith is a problem for scientific objectivity. There is, as Ben Meyer puts it, a fear of subjectivity here. We are afraid as scholars that a post-modern perspective will lead to 'anything goes'. Any view of Jesus will be just as good as any other. We will, in fact, be out of a job, no longer needed to guide young minds into the truth about religious history. Ben Meyer points us to the proper way out of this fear in his review of criteria or indices of authenticity: not to shun subjectivity, but to embrace it as a moment on the way toward objectivity.

I have myself been involved in the study of the philosophy of science, so please forgive me if I put this whole issue in terms of the relationship between faith and science. In this brief essay I can, of course, only suggest a way forward. First of all, let us recognize the prejudice of perspective. This means that I, as a scientist (social or natural), recognize that my world-view is bound to influence what I call data, and how I weigh the evidence in reaching toward the

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28 Meier, Marginal Jew, i. 5 f.
best explanation. Second, we recognize pluralism in world-views. There are many different ways of understanding reality. Pluralism and the prejudice of perspective should lead us to humility, but not to despair or to relativism. Cognitive relativism does not follow from plurality or from the prejudice of perspective. There is a real world out there to know, and a real past, too. We do know things about reality, after all. It does, however, lead to humility. Our results are not certain. They are not purely neutral. They may be ‘scientific’, but that does not grant them certainty as Troeltsch himself knew.

Let us embrace our faith, and recognize it for what it is. And of course, by ‘faith’ I do not mean only religious faith, but would include all world-views, such as Marxism or scientific materialism. They, too, operate on faith or trust. We accept that faith may distort our judgement, but at the same time, it may give us deeper understanding. There just is no way to tell, except in the give and take of pluralistic and public dialogue, whether our faith is distorting or helpful to understanding the object of study. So, in the end, we subject our conclusions to public scrutiny and careful scientific examination, then revise them in the light of what we learn in that process.

So I am not abandoning the quest for truth and reality. Relativism is just as destructive of true historical and scientific research as the myth of a purely historical Jesus. I affirm objective truth; it is the claim to objective knowledge I object to. Nor am I suggesting a return to the old dogmatic method of presuming the truth of our faith and refusing to change in the light of evidence. But let us face the facts. The evidence about Jesus is slight, and capable of many equally reasonable interpretations. The social sciences do not have the same objective status as the natural sciences, for they cannot do experiments (except in a few cases) to test which theory or interpretation is true. Measurements and mathematical theories are few and far between in history. So the social sciences draw more fully on subjective judgement. But this does not mean that they are unscientific. And in the case of Jesus, the evidence is so slight and so capable of many interpretations that our faith

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30 This is argued well by Gadamer in hermeneutics (Truth and Method), by Alasdair MacIntyre (First Principles, Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophical Issues (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1990)) for ethical principles, and by Larry Laudan for the philosophy of science (Science and Relativism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990)).
stance is bound to have a tremendous influence on our reconstruction of the historical Jesus. But this does not mean that the quest is in vain, or that faith is not at risk. It is. For Christianity has made certain historical claims, and must demonstrate to a public, pluralistic audience that it has reasons, arguments, and evidence for them. We can prove that Christianity is reasonable, even if we cannot prove it is true in the open market-place of ideas.  

I am arguing, then, that we must integrate faith and science, reason and religion, in an overall coherent and rational world-view. Each aspect of our world-view, both faith and science, has its place. Each is open to modification in the light of the other. Faith and science must be in dialogue and mutual modification, as we seek an overall world-view that is rationally satisfactory and existentially meaningful.

There is one point at which the old myth of a purely historical Jesus was correct. This has to do with the distinction between history and the other sciences. While history does investigate the past, its explanations are created in terms of psycho-social understanding. History is limited to the human, to human events and artefacts, and to explanations in terms of psycho-social forces and institutions. There is, in fact, a precise parallel here with natural science. Take as an example the initial expansion of the universe at the Big Bang. This is clearly a past event, but it is not a historical event (in the sense of history as an academic discipline). Indeed, I think the term ‘historical event’ is a misleading one, since it can mean either a past event or an event subject to historical explanation. More precision can be had if we stick to natural-scientific explanations versus historical explanations. The Big Bang is subject to natural-scientific explanations, but not to historical explanations. The American Revolution, on the other hand, is an event that cannot be adequately explained by natural science. We need historical explanations, based on psycho-social causal factors, to understand it fully.

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Now the myth of a purely historical Jesus insisted on a distinction between theology and history. And this distinction is a valid one. But it is best understood on the model of levels of explanation in the sciences.\(^2\) When teaching about Jesus in an academic and pluralistic context, therefore, we should say this: our class is limited to events in the life of Jesus that are subject to historical explanation or verification. We focus on normal historical explanations for the life of Jesus, and exclude from consideration any theological explanations. In fact, this is what we do in any case, but let us be open and up front about it. It is important to distinguish history from theology, in terms of the goals and methods of each discipline. But we can separate history and theology without the arrogance of the myth of a purely historical Jesus. In terms of scholarly publications, on the other hand, let us return to John Meier. His conclusions are better than the methodology he espouses. His results are not based upon a mythological consensus among scholars. What he should say about his methodology is this: it is limited to events in the life of Jesus that are subject to historical explanation, focuses on normal historical explanations for the life of Jesus, and excludes from consideration any theological explanations. In fact, this is what he does in any case.

With this difference between history and theology in mind, let us take the resurrection of Jesus as an example. If this event happened at all, it is a past event. Some have suggested that it did not take place in space and time; yet, if it took place at all, it surely did so in space and time. If Jesus rose from the dead, this event has a date, and it took place at a certain location in space, just outside Jerusalem. However, if it did happen, it is not subject to natural-scientific explanation. Likewise, it is not subject to historical explanation. Historical science is incapable of making a theological judgement about whether or not God could or did raise Jesus (at the same time, historical scientific judgement is important to the theological issue, of course). Rather, if the resurrection did take place, only a theological explanation, based upon the causal powers of God, will be fully

satisfactory to human reason. Social science cannot explain how someone rose from the dead. So we can and should accept the difference between natural-scientific, social-scientific (including historical), and theological explanations. When John Meier writes about the resurrection, he will no doubt limit himself to natural and historical explanations of the event. And that is very helpful and important. But we can separate history and theology without the myth of a purely historical Jesus and all its arrogant and self-deluding properties. Rather, we must insist that faith and science respect and learn from each other, while recognizing that they are not the same thing (you can learn exactly this same lesson by reflecting critically upon the debate between evolution and ‘creation science’).

A good example of how the myth of a purely historical Jesus can delude and confuse biblical scholars is the recent book on the resurrection by Gerd Luedemann. There are a host of problems with this book, but one of them is surely that Luedemann insists, against both reason and faith, that historical explanation is the only legitimate kind of explanation for past events. He rejects any idea that God might actually do anything in history that could be known by people. Buying into the prejudice of modernity, he labels any attempt to discuss theological explanation as ‘apologetic manoeuvres to evade history. Here the historical question is demoted to a question which is marginal compared with theology.’ In fact, Luedemann’s methodology reduces theology to mere social-scientific explanation. Reasons for past events based on the action of God (what I am calling ‘theological explanation’) are ruled out a priori. And that is just a piece of Enlightenment bias. The basic problem here is a positivist or empiricist notion of what counts as ‘scientific explanation’ (social or natural). Does this positivist bias lead, in his book, to a better understanding of the early Church’s Easter faith? Hardly. Because he refuses to allow the resurrection to (possibly) be beyond historical explanation, he generates a so-called historical explanation that is patently absurd, based upon pseudo-historical ‘depth psychology’ as a source for understanding the myth of the resurrection, which Peter (in his grief) imagined to himself. Luedemann’s treatment of New Testament texts is a hatchet job, based on a sceptical (rather than critical) approach to the texts. He always finds some way to fit the texts to his anti-supernatural bias.

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and psycho-historical prejudices. His so-called explanation is in fact far less likely than any miracle! Here we find yet another book shipwrecked on the shoals of the myth of a purely historical Jesus. Just to take one example, in discussing Paul’s first encounter with the Risen One, Luedemann writes: ‘the conversion of Paul must [his emphasis!] in principle be accessible to historical criticism, even if at present not all the details are yet known. Only through the mediation of an understandable [i.e. purely historical!] approach to the event of Paul’s conversion is it possible to discuss its meaning and its significance.’34 In his polemic against Martin Hengel (who correctly insists, as a Christian scholar, that the resurrection is not reducible without remainder to historical explanations) Luedemann demands that we attempt psycho-historical readings of the apostle. ‘A really historical work cannot rest content’, he insists, with a past event which cannot be fully explained by social science.35 But why not? Is social science, rather than God, now omniscient? With prejudices and confusions like these, Luedemann’s book provides an excellent example of the way the myth of a purely historical Jesus leads to both bad history and bad theology.

This leads me to one last issue, which again can only be touched upon briefly. I have been arguing that we should recognize and publicly admit our trust or faith during scientific investigations. Christian historians, then, should openly acknowledge their belief in the resurrection even while seeking careful historical and public evidence for this claim. But this avoids ‘dogmatic’ circular reasoning only if our faith is open to revision in the light of evidence. One objection to the view I am arguing for might come from a misunderstanding of ‘faith’.

A major error in Western thought has been committed in the analysis of ‘faith’. Because of the deep effect that faith has upon life, some thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard have insisted that faith must have existential certainty.36 Therefore, faith cannot be based upon the probability arguments of history, philosophy, and science. This error in analysis is at the root of the division between faith and science.

We must not separate faith and science again in our culture, for

34 Ibid. 59. He refers here to ‘Holsten’s starting point’ and clearly adopts it himself.
35 Ibid. 80.
this leads to terrible destruction. But what, then, is the right understanding of the relationship between faith and reason? As a Christian I have faith in Christ, a faith which I would, under God's care, be willing to die for. Hopefully I will not be put to the test! But this strong existential certainty does not translate into epistemic certainty. That is the category mistake that Kierkegaard, Bultmann, Willi Marxsen, and so many others have made. Rather, my interpretation of the meaning of my faith in God must be open to rational reflection and revision in the light of reason, evidence, and argument. Of course, this rational reflection does not happen at the same moment, or in the same mood, as the experience of faith itself. My rational reflection and interpretation of faith constitute a different, critical moment, quite distinct from the personal and existential moment of faith. Few people hold their deepest faith because of arguments. And religious faith is certainly quite different in its logic and 'grammar' from a scientific hypothesis. Nevertheless, our faith itself, and especially our interpretation of the meaning of that faith, is open to revision in more critical and reflective moments. In the face of objections to faith, or in the face of terrible experiences of suffering or oppression, I may come to doubt. At that point my continued faith may well depend upon arguments, reasons, and evidence, as well as the private and personal grounds on which faith originally rose and continues to well up in my soul. I may also encounter difficult questions, or rational problems, with the implications of my faith. In such instances, I have a duty to myself and the truth to investigate the reasonableness of my beliefs. Fideism is in the long run unsatisfactory.

Let us take up the example of the resurrection of Jesus. Imagine that after careful historical research I concluded not only that there is limited evidence for a resurrection of a publicly available sort (which is compatible with belief in the resurrection), but that all the best evidence was against the resurrection. What then? Would that change my faith? It would certainly change my interpretation of Christianity. Gone would be any hope of my own real resurrection after death, for example. My understanding of biblical authority would no doubt weaken, if this central historical claim turned out to be false. But I would hope that my faith in God, and in Jesus, would still remain. I might become a liberal United Methodist theologian, but I would not cease to be a Christian.

Our interpretation of both faith and science must be open to revision in the light of reason, evidence, and argument. Of course, there
is no one right understanding of reasoning or logic, or of what counts as evidence and a good argument. Here we have to do the best we can, with the tools and methods that are most appropriate to our quest for truth. But there can be no guarantees to truth, not in the area of faith and not in the area of science.

Let us therefore embrace our faith, and recognize it for what it is, but be willing to admit that others’ faiths have insight we need. Let us use our best methodologies and scientific, critical thinking; but this does not mean that we have to be sceptical of the religion we are studying, or of its texts and sources. Let us, instead, seek to understand, sympathize with, and appreciate the religious faiths we study. In terms of education, this means that the job of religion and Bible teachers is not to destroy the faiths of our students. We have a moral duty not to use our position as teachers to undermine and shock the religious faiths of our students, however naive or closed-minded they may be. Instead, let us help each student to integrate their own faith (not ours, theirs) with the methods, scholarship, and results with which vigorous academic training have provided us. I suggest that it is bad pedagogy to seek to ‘blow away the fundamentalists’, however tempting it may be! Rather, college and university students need help in the integration of faith and science, whatever faith they may have.

The myth of a purely historical Jesus has distorted scholarship long enough. It has served as a mask to shield us from criticism, to delude ourselves and others, to confuse us as to the character of the historical method and the certainty of our historical results. In our post-modern situation, progress will be made only when we each embrace and understand our own faith stance, stake our claim in the public and pluralistic market-place of ideas, and give what reasons, evidence, and arguments we can for our conclusions. My plea, then, is this: let us take off the mask of pure objectivity, and speak to each other face to face.\(^{37}\)

\(^{37}\) The author is grateful for his kind reception by the American Academy of Religion, Western Region, and the Society of Biblical Literature, Pacific Coast Region, where he read an earlier version of this chapter as a Presidential Address for 1996. Equally kind was my reception at the Department of Theology in Durham, England, which heard another version of the chapter, a most happy occasion for me and my wife. A very early version of this essay was also read to the Joseph Butler Society at Oxford, in 1987. Finally, my thanks to the following colleagues for helpful criticism: Steve Davis, Gerry O’Collins, Sharon Pearson, Sarah Coakley, and Ralph Martin. I am grateful to Davis and O’Collins, in particular, for the invitation to the Resurrection Summit.