

Method in the Study of Early Christianity

Robert Crotty

One aspect of Religion Studies that has come to recent public prominence has been the study of Early Christianity in conjunction with Historical Jesus Research.¹ In the United States there has been widespread acknowledgment of the 2000th anniversary, the Second Millennium, of the birth of Jesus. The dating is based on the fact that the gospels of Matthew and Luke refer Jesus' birth to the time of Herod the Great. Historically, his death is given as 4 BCE and so the latest possible date for Jesus' birth, if the gospel record is accepted, would be 4 BCE. The celebration has galvanised those scholars involved in the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar to take on a more aggressive profile. Harper Collins has even set up an address on the Internet so that scholars could address issues in a more orderly fashion, although some exchanges have been politely barbed.

If we are in the throes of a Third Quest, what of the First? The First Quest took place in the nineteenth century. The western world had reacted to the Enlightenment by elevating science and history to the status of true and reliable knowledge. If Christians were to trust the gospels and their founding account of Christianity then these documents had to be certified as historical. A tortuous analysis of the gospels to find historically reliable sources resulted. The First Quest was reckoned to have concluded with Schweitzer's claim in 1906 that any search for an historical Jesus was doomed to failure.

The Second Quest (at the time known as 'the new quest') began in the 1950s with Ernst Kasemann and James M. Robinson. They were dissatisfied with a Protestant theology derived mainly from Rudolf Bultmann which seemed more and more to dismiss any need for an historical Jesus. The 'New Questers' maintained that they could discern the vague and shadowy historical outline of a figure who ministered in Galilee, travelled to Jerusalem and was executed there before his followers proclaimed that he had risen from the dead.

But the Second Quest was soon overtaken by new developments. In 1947 the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered and they were to be gradually published. Earlier in 1945 the Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi had come to light and documents like the

¹ R. Crotty, *The Jesus question: the historical search*, Melbourne, 1996.

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Gospel of Thomas and the *Gospel of Philip* were available for comparison with the canonical gospel sayings.

During the 1980s the Third Quest began. It was based on a new confidence in literary analysis of the gospels which had received considerable stimulus from comparison with the Nag Hammadi texts. It was also based on developments in the history and archaeology of the Palestinian area, including the Qumran findings. More importantly, it introduced new interdisciplinary models and perspectives: cultural anthropology, social history, sociology and feminist studies. The Third Questers see new historical possibilities. Thus, E. P. Sanders can write:

The dominant view today seems to be that we can know pretty well what Jesus was out to accomplish, that we can know a lot about what he said and that these two things make sense within the world of first century Judaism.¹

This self-assurance is nowhere more evident than in the United States' Jesus Seminar. Historical Jesus researchers meet twice yearly to debate the historical authenticity of Jesus sayings. They vote using coloured counters: red means a high degree of certainty that a saying goes back to Jesus himself; pink means more likely yes than no; grey means maybe; black means probably or certainly not. Only a low proportion of sayings were deemed to deserve a red counter.

If we look at John Dominic Crossan, a stalwart Third Quester and a convenor of the Jesus Seminar, we find that he relies for the elements of his history on what can be recovered from a methodological 'triad'. The triad consists first of all of the Jesus literature which is neatly stratified into levels, by analogy with an archaeological *tell*, from the time of the gospels back to the Jesus period. Secondly, there is social anthropology and thirdly, Greco-Roman history. Thus, Crossan is able to use reputable anthropological studies to deal with the manifestations of trance among human groups. Then he relies on Greco-Roman history to demonstrate that Galileans in the later Second Temple period were under stringent colonial oppression, a state which gave rise to manifestations of trance. Into this, he introduces those Jesus-sayings and actions concerning exorcism which can reliably be situated in the actual Jesus period. He then feels confident that he has contextualised a complex of sayings and actions related to Jesus'

¹ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, London, 1985, p. 2.

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exorcism activity within a reliable cultural setting and that this can function as one solid building block in his historical reconstruction.

At this point a new factor needs to be addressed. Many, but not all, of the Third Questers and the Jesus Seminar Fellows are committed Christian adherents. Is there a difference when a committed Christian does the history of Jesus? Crossan, for example, makes it patently clear that he is working as an historian. He explicitly distinguishes his work from that of the theologian.

There were always historians who said it (historical Jesus research) could not be done because of historical problems. There were always theologians who said it should not be done because of theological objections. And there were always scholars who said the former but meant the latter.¹

Yet, Crossan sees a close link between his history and theology. He would say that unless the Christian theologian has a reliable historical construct for Jesus (presumably Crossan's own construct) then any subsequent theological statement is going to be warped.

From all of this, I think two questions emerge: how should the historian go about writing the history of Jesus and of early Christianity? And what does a scholar do with the historical Jesus once he has been reconstructed?

I begin by insisting that the principal model on which the reconstruction of a historical Jesus is accomplished and the first logical step thereto is not cultural anthropology or sociology or feminist studies. It is that phenomenology of religion which yields a structure by which religion in general can be understood. Recently I have tried to base such a structure on the pluralist notion of religion as a cultural system by which humans find ultimate purpose and direction in life.²

¹ J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, San Francisco, 1991, p. xxvii.

² Crotty, *op. cit.*

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**INDIRECT-MEDIATORIAL
SYSTEM**

Ultimate focus



**Intermediary
symbolic foci**

(Theophany)

Human mediators



Community

**IMMEDIATE-MEDIATORIAL
SYSTEM**

Ultimate focus



Community

What any religion offers is an ultimate focus on life, a focus which, in historical time, has taken on certain socio-symbolic forms. A religious community identifies a mediatorial system in order to make existential contact with intermediary symbolic foci. I attempted to identify two overlapping and complementary systems which indicate how humans have established mediation with these intermediary foci.

I would see that the task of the history of religions is to flesh out this theoretical structure with historically verifiable socio-symbolic forms. Symbols are the very substance of the religious enterprise and no religion is based on purely abstract structure. In reality a religion requires concrete symbols in the form of mythical stories and images and ritual activity.

But that is still not sufficient for the Historical Jesus researcher who is not simply addressing static religion, but a religion at its point of origin, at the moment of its historical disaggregation from a pre-existing religious complex. That considerably complicates the matter. What happens at that moment in a religion's life when the current symbols are manipulated, when new symbols are drawn into the system so that a revolutionary change occurs? This is a key part of the issue debated by sociologists engaged in the so-called 'church and sect' discussion on religious typology. It is my contention that the religious process works in the following way. Within an established religious group, a religious cultural heritage, made up of patterns of response shaping the dispositions of group

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members so that they take up a meaningful posture before their ultimate focus, is transmitted from one generation to another. This heritage is encapsulated in the myth and ritual complex peculiar to that group and it forms the group cultural system, which individuals can activate as their own personal religious system.

However, if there should be persistent dissatisfaction with the system, drastic change can take place when the ideological system, responsible for evaluation of the tradition, undergoes change. This would be due to values, coming from outside the system, being accepted by deviants into their personal cultural systems. When these deviants become sufficiently numerous and influential they activate a new system against the prevailing one. Such change would call for a radical reordering of the central myth and therefore new socio-symbolic forms.

Where does this lead historical Jesus research? It can be presumed from both literary and historical evidence that Judaism was in paradigmatic confusion in the first century CE. There was no such thing as 'Judaism', there were many Judaisms vying for dominance.¹ While there were identifiable groups that a sociologist would readily identify as 'sects' such as Pharisaism, Sadduceeism, Essenism, there was nothing comparable to what a sociologist would call a 'church'. Each sect had its own specific religious system and its own authority structure and, importantly, each was endeavouring to ensure some principle of succession within that authority structure. Where can Christianity be located in this process? A group of Jewish sect-like groups, which had imbibed elements of the new Jesus tradition, would have undergone a paradigm shift and then sought stability. This is the prime context of early Christianity and the context within which any viable historical interpretation of Jesus must take place.

The materials we have for this task are the gospels and any other data that can be referred to the first century CE. In order to explain the Jesus who became the mediator in a new structure, acceptance of whom brought about the paradigmatic shift, we need to go back to the gospels as unified documents. They contain the new Christian central myth. But the researcher must read them synchronically not diachronically. It is not a question of where the elements came from but what the tradition as a totality is saying. While trying to isolate the layers of traditions and refind authentic Jesus sayings, in the mode of the Jesus Seminar, might be interesting, in the final analysis

¹ J. Neusner, W. Green and E. Frerichs (eds.), *Judaisms and their messiahs at the turn of the era*, Cambridge, 1987.

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it does not yield the data that are required for the initial stages of a historical reconstruction.

It must be said that the 'historical Jesus' could never pretend to be the 'real Jesus' which is beyond the reconstruction of any human science; the 'historical Jesus' is not even 'Jesus as he was' since that has no meaning unless it is accompanied by the rider 'as he was to group X'. The historical Jesus is an approximation made by historians in the present, who attempt a coherent interpretation of how a first century Jesus would have operated in his context. The historian of today could hypothetically see Jesus as the Romans saw him and dialogue with this approximation, but no historian as far as I am aware would claim to have the data to do so. The historians of today only have the Christian records and they must limit themselves to the parameters imposed by those records. The one history they can write is how the first Christian generation saw Jesus. For this, they need the gospel *in toto* with elements that go back to Jesus and elements that do not go back to Jesus.

This is how I see the role of the historical Jesus researcher. While attempts to identify Jesus with a Mediterranean peasant,¹ a Cynic philosopher,² the Wicked Priest³ and on and on might be fascinating, they are historically isolated as they stand. Who interpreted him as such? Why did they so interpret him? For what purpose?

At the end of the day the historical Jesus researcher should have a fleshed out version of how a religious construct (of which there might be several variants) was formed in the first century with 'Jesus' as an essential part of the newly formed construct. The history should account for the drastic change that has taken place, for the specific manipulation of symbols, for the principle of authority succession that has been put in place.

The Historical Jesus researcher should then attempt to account for the stimulus which the generation who embraced the new structure received moving them to manipulate the symbols and restructure the former system. Were they stimulated by a Jesus interpreted as a Mediterranean Jewish peasant, a Cynic philosopher or what? But this is a subsequent question. The historian must then hold the historical approximation of the stimulus in symbiotic relationship with the new socio-symbolic forms. The question is not who Jesus actually *was*, or who Jesus *thought himself to be*, but who the founding generation thought Jesus to be.

¹ Crossan, *op. cit.*

² B. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence*, Philadelphia, 1988.

³ B. Thiering, *Jesus the Man*, Philadelphia, 1992.

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Now, to the second question: What can be made of this historical construct? The answer depends on whether the historian is an historian *simpliciter* or a theological historian. The theologian, the Christian from within, is primarily interested in the religious structure as it presently exists. By definition, the Christian from within has found and finds existential contact with the ultimate focus through the presently existing Christian structure. Why would such a person do history? Perhaps out of interest; perhaps in order to refine, to change or challenge the present structure.

Unlike Crossan, I would see no *a priori* reason for a Christian, who finds a discrepancy between the first century structure (in which Jesus might be identified with the Moses/Messiah figure) and a present day structure (in which Jesus would have one of his canonical statuses, perhaps something more like the God-Human of the Chalcedonian definition) to be dismayed or to make a drastic change. Nor do I think that the committed Christian should be dismayed to find a discrepancy between the socio-symbolic forms of the Moses/Messiah figure and the historical reconstruction of the first century stimulus. Traditions inevitably develop and take on new forms.

For the historian *simpliciter* all fleshed-out structures are interesting, but the original, in this case the Christian structure with Jesus as its mediatorial symbol, is of particular historical value. If the original can be confidently identified then subsequent changes can be more accurately charted and the way is open for a fecund explanation of change in Christian history.

I see my own work as being part of the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus but perhaps unfortunately I do not see that there is anything that will grip the popular imagination in the sort of things in this paper. What will emerge will be tedious and sober scholarship, the means to achieve a more satisfying understanding of Christian history and a more profound recognition of what it means for humans to be religious.

And it is in speaking of sober scholarship and the understanding of *homo religiosus*, the human as religious, that I give due honour to Professor Eric Sharpe. He has laboured long and gloriously in the vineyard of the study of religion. The fruits of his labours are manifold and he richly deserves the encomia that he has received.