

Contending with Postmodern Hermeneutics and Biblical Criticism Thinking Philosophical Theology with the Jesus Seminar

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The Jesus Seminar concluded its project on the historical Jesus in 1998 with the work on the *Profiles of Jesus*¹ (appearing in 2002). This collection of essays followed the publication of *The Acts of Jesus*, which in turn was the follow up to the more controversial and widely known original publication of the Seminar, *The Five Gospels*² (1993).

The conclusions of *The Five Gospels* were in general sync with biblical scholarship when the Fellows of the Seminar claimed that approximately 20% of the sayings attributed to Jesus over the first three centuries of the Common Era could be judged as reasonably historic.³ This was the consensus reached through a simple voting technique expressing the collective opinion on the authenticity of Jesus sayings. The colors red and pink represented the opinion that Jesus probably said this or something like this. The colors grey and black expressed degrees of greater improbability.

Even though the conclusions of the Seminar in relation to the sayings of Jesus were uncontroversial in the general setting of biblical studies, that the media followed with interest the deliberations of the Seminar turn the otherwise academic project called “The Jesus Seminar” into a kind of catch phrase if not convenient paradigm to represent questionable scholarship, anti-Christian sentiment, and generally fringe ideas. The Seminar in fact rested its conclusions on the fundamentals of mainline biblical criticism that were established after the revolutionary breakthroughs of 19th and 20th century historiography. To be sure, the Seminar did not just repeat the conclusions of previous generations but, like all scholarly enterprises, relied upon previous work to stir new perspective and expose the need for new or revised models. Still, likely due to unexpected public interest, the Jesus Seminar became, and often remains, a convenient foil by which to characterize so-called extreme scholarship.

In a book review otherwise unrelated to biblical criticism, Robert Magliola offered a passing and typical criticism of the Jesus Seminar based on the cache of the

¹ *Profiles of Jesus* (ed., Roy Hoover), Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2002.

² *The Acts of Jesus* (eds., Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar), New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998; *The Five Gospels* (eds., Robert Funk, Roy Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar), New York: Scribner's, 1993. The

³ Many people belittle this percentage as both paltry and absurd, but 20% is actually a very high number in the spectrum of biblical scholarship. Many scholars would conclude that 0% of such material can be traced back to the historical Jesus. Robert Miller makes this point extremely well in *The Jesus Seminar and its Critics*. Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 1999.

Seminar as a convenient paradigm for “fringe” scholarship. Magliola accused the author under review (Robert Knitter who writes about Buddhism and Christianity) of “cafeteria-styled spirituality” and “dependence on the fringe conclusions of the ‘Jesus Seminar,’ and the like.”⁴ This casual dismissal of the Jesus Seminar inspired by hermeneutical thought is often employed by biblical critics themselves. It reveals a subtle tension, even a contention, that exists between postmodern forms of hermeneutics, in which the motivation of the critic is always under scrutiny, and the critic who uses a methodology to reach a result. The contention expresses suspicion held by a hermeneut of an author/agent’s motivation in using a chosen method. In the case of the Jesus Seminar, suspicion comes to the fore mostly through other biblical critics, but it is founded upon insights drawn from hermeneutical philosophy and theology. To some extent this contention is justified, representing a genuine concern for any researcher and writer. All scholars ought to be cautious about imposing a silent agenda upon their subject. But in many ways it is an unjustified contention that falsely casts the suspicions of hermeneutics against the methods of biblical criticism. In this scene, neither side benefits from the other nor pushes the other to new levels of inquiry. If we concentrate initially on the nature of hermeneutics and then see how hermeneutical contentions were used against the Jesus Seminar, it will be possible to explore the question of the historical Jesus beyond the regular cycle of critique and defense.

About Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the struggle involved in interpretation; it is the struggle to hear the relay of Hermes who retrieves and sends messages from and to the other side, from and to the gods, from and to Being. To indulge Hermes is to indulge in the ambiguities of interpretation, which consist of questioning the appropriateness of the message sent, the meaning of the message received, and even the abilities of the messenger (that is, the method used to engage the text). To indulge Hermes is to indulge the question of meaning.

Since about the 14th century, when William of Ockham declared that a substance is not a thing outside the mind,⁵ hermeneutics has been less about sending messages out to Being than about being in Being, being in that for which there is no outside. In the 19th century, the concentration on this world of being delivered both biblical criticism and philosophical theology to the realization that religion is human creation; it is that

⁴ Robert Magliola, review of *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian* (Paul F. Knitter) in *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78,4 (2010), 1217.

⁵ William of Ockham, *Summa Logicae*, I,15 (from Baird, Forrest E. and Walter Kaufmann, eds. *Medieval Philosophy*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000, p. 740).

which emerges in and with the projective activity of humans being in history. This was directly the conclusion of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) and the operating assumption of D. F. Strauss (1808-1874). It remains true to say that this basic insight continues to define religion as a problem that concerns human values and the human future.

Hermeneutics, then, identifies a struggle, but as such it does not hope for an end to struggle.⁶ It is about confronting the question of meaning, but not about concluding the quest for meaning. Since meaning, like Being and God, has from the 19th century fallen into history, the quest for meaning remains the activity of being in history; it remains the human condition of historicity, of being-there in the world. We might even say that hermeneutics operates like the uncertainty principle of quantum mechanics because it consists of the permanent and unstabilizing question about how history (being-there) predisposes the interpretive experience of the horizon of being. Hermeneutics questions how meaning “happens,” how it is “there,” in the phenomenon of being human with the world. Hermeneutics raises the question of meaning with the knowledge that social factors, whether of power, gender, or economics, have already formed the predisposition of experience in the world and have, consequently, created meaning as an “event” of history. Since the reading of the world presupposes the factors of being-there in the world, hermeneutics is the principle of uncertainty because it factors-in time, location, culture, and language as colors of the art of interpretation. Martin Heidegger called the factors that continually structure the art of interpretation the “compartment” of intentionality.⁷ He meant that the view upon the world, which is expressed intentionality, is always and already a view located in history before the horizon of being cast in time.

While it is true that the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar in *The Five Gospels* are consistent with contemporary practices in the analytical study of the Bible, the criticism directed at the Seminar comes from the inspirational, and at times misunderstood, background of hermeneutics. The contention lies not so much with the results yielded in the Seminar but the methodology chosen to yield them. In various ways, it is charged, the Seminar is guilty of hermeneutical naivety: reaping the benefits of the method sewn without considering how the chosen method pre-packages or even fore-words the conclusion reached. “I have always belonged,” writes Ben Vedder, “to a meaningful spectrum that co-determines what I perceive and what I make the subject of my thinking

⁶ John Caputo contrasts the hermeneutical task of moving forward - *kinesis* and repetition - as always on the move and always in the problem with the Greek (Platonic) tradition of recollection - seeking the quiet, the receding, and the immovable. See *Radical Hermeneutics*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 61.

and questioning.”⁸ Belonging to a “meaningful spectrum” is effectively the critique of methodology as a tool that sketches before hand the spectrum in which a view is held. The apparent inability of the Seminar to notice this co-determinant element - that spectrum of meaning to which one already belongs - is a favorite criticism directed at the Seminar by its main detractors. It is a criticism that arises in various argumentative forms when philosophically inspired hermeneutic casts its comportmental suspicions on the art of biblical criticism.

Yet, this “favorite criticism” of hermeneutics, while attractive, is neither insightful nor even accurate when directed at the Jesus Seminar. Granted it is a thought provoking criticism, it is still not, as Heidegger would have said, what we call thinking.⁹ Thinking involves the struggle of taking a thought to a new location beyond the permission the method grants, but an easy criticism involves raising a thought - being thought provoking - with the already established method. It might be said that the favorite criticism leveled against the Jesus Seminar is only thought provoking; it does not involve the struggle to take a thought to a new location. The real task of hermeneutics related to the Jesus Seminar is thinking with the Seminar beyond the level of its thought provoking analysis. The task at hand is now twofold, understanding first the favorite criticism and its shortcomings and second seeking a genuine contribution to hermeneutical thinking about religion after the work of the Jesus Seminar.

Hermeneutics and the Historic Jesus

In his book, *A Scandalous Jesus*,¹⁰ Joseph Bessler reminds us of the difference between history and the historic. History, of course, is the record of past events, but the historic is that which changes the perception of history. Religion is particularly susceptible to housing the historic. Religion is often the home of the event that changed history, even when the “event” in question never happened. God gave the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai. Forgetting for the moment the historical improbability of this event, the literary problems about differing traditions, and the differing ways Jewish tradition holds this memory, the event is still historic. While the historian can justly conclude that the event never happened, it would be ridiculous to conclude accordingly that this “non-event” is not the most historic thing that ever happened in the Jewish imagination. The same is true of the Christian resurrection: this non-event is the most historic thing that ever

⁸ Vedder, Ben. “Religion and Hermeneutic Philosophy,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 51,1 (2002), 40-41.

⁹ See Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1968.

¹⁰ Joseph A. Bessler, *A Scandalous Jesus*. Salem, Oregon: Polebridge Press, 2013.

happened in the Christian imagination. The Buddha's first turn of the dharma wheel is also a most historic non-event. Things do not have to happen in history literally to be historic, and religion is among the best locations to demonstrate this point.¹¹

In the classic book *Christ and Time*¹² Oscar Cullmann attempted to demonstrate that for the Christian imagination the resurrection of Jesus changed the way time was understood. The resurrection was an event, in this sense, that was historic because it changed the experience of the world. In more recent work, such as *In Search of Paul*,¹³ Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed make a similar point when indicating that for Paul Christ and the Kingdom of God are the inverse experience of Caesar and the Empire of Rome. Accordingly, to be with Paul in his vision, and perhaps to be with Jesus in his vision, is to experience time differently: different values, different reasoning, different priorities. The two forms of being in history from the Pauline perspective, Crossan and Reed point out, are Roman piety, victory, and peace *versus* Pauline faith, equality, and peace. These oppositional values are indicative of differing "time" perceptions; each cluster is a form of being in history with a time horizon distinctively construed such that they are indeed distinctively "historic" entry points into history.

What Bessler indicates is that Christian theology offers several historic entry points into history (the resurrection, the Council of Nicaea, the Reformation), each being not just a part of Christian history but also re-orientations in the points of entry to Christian history. Then, Bessler wonders why, or perhaps if, the study of the historical Jesus, beyond a question of history, should not also be a question of historic re-orientation. Indeed does not the very scandal of the historical Jesus arise from the possibility that this critical form of study is a "historic" event?

...the question of the historical Jesus was, in fact, not only a historical question but also a *historic question*-a question that created a series of profound social, political, and theological impacts that have continued to shape and reshape our world. It is a question that cannot be reduced to this or that particular proposal about the historical Jesus, but a question whose disturbing power has not only *not* gone away, but continues to open up new spaces for historical and theological construction and new spaces of lived faith.¹⁴

¹¹ I suppose one could argue that politics is pretty good at it, too.

¹² Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964.

¹³ Crossan, John Dominic and Jonathan L. Reed. *In Search of Paul*. New York: HarperCollins, 2004.

¹⁴ *A Scandalous Jesus*, 2.

If it is the case that “the historic” marks a shift in perception or orientation in time, that it is not “history” *per se* but history as “event,” then it can also be stated that theology, which is not history but the philosophical contemplation of the history of religion, is the task of defining the historic. Theology is the explanation or the apology of the historic within time and within culture. This means that the historic element of the historical Jesus lies in the way the historical Jesus changes Christian theology. Yet, unfortunately or perhaps ironically, the historical Jesus has not been able to perform miracles inside the house of theology, and this is largely due to the reception of the historic with the suspicion of the hermeneutic. I will gather this suspicion under three headings: the suspicion of convenience, the suspicion of naive methodology, and the suspicion of perniciousness. I will suggest that not only are these suspicions misguided but also that they do not constitute the act of “thinking” in relation to the historic question about the historical Jesus.

The Suspicion of Convenience

Even though *The Five Gospels* begin with the expressed warning, “Beware of finding a Jesus entirely congenial to you,”¹⁵ this very criticism was frequently directed at the Jesus Seminar during and following its proceedings. The criticism constitutes the suspicion of convenience. Scholars who reacted most stringently against the Jesus Seminar invariably did so on the basis of defending an apocalyptic Jesus, that is, a Jesus who believed in and busily announced the end of the world (the great cosmic cleanup). Since the end of the 19th Century and the conclusions of Albert Schweitzer’s *Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906, ET 1910), the standard reading in biblical scholarship had been that the historical Jesus was a prophet of the end times (*eschaton*). With this reading of Jesus established, Schweitzer posed his apocalyptic (and true) historical Jesus in contrast to the modern (and false) gentle Jesus, and he expressed hope that his true historical Jesus might take up the sword against the false modern Jesus. “...It is a good thing,” Schweitzer wrote, “that the true historical Jesus should overthrow the modern Jesus, should rise up against the modern spirit and send upon earth, not peace, but a sword.”¹⁶ Had Schweitzer known that his apocalyptic Jesus would, in the twentieth century, become the violent Jesus of both Islamic and Christian extremism, perhaps he would have reconsidered his use of Christian metaphor. Nevertheless, an important contrast that continues in our time was made: an apocalyptic Jesus, who is “other” in relation to modernity, is a true

¹⁵ *The Five Gospels*, p. 5.

¹⁶ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 403.

Jesus whereas a non-apocalyptic Jesus is too conveniently modern to be taken seriously. In other words, to use hermeneutical language, a non-apocalyptic Jesus suspiciously “comports” to the “intentionality” of the modern. As Paula Fredriksen exemplifies, this suspicion of convenience is merited because “Such a [modern] Jesus - caring, staunchly egalitarian, antinationalist - is immediately, comfortably relevant to our own concerns.”¹⁷

The suspicion of convenience appears as the most popular criticism among biblical scholars who express grave doubts about the Jesus Seminar.¹⁸ Howard Kee made a direct charge, indicating that the Seminar’s non-apocalyptic Jesus is “...only the late twentieth-century counterpart of earlier scholarly attempts to recreate Jesus in a form more compatible with the current intellectual climate.”¹⁹ This same critique of convenience surfaces in the attention of theological and philosophical scholars of religion. While not expressly referring to the Jesus Seminar, philosophers of religion often find it is necessary to regard religion as that factor that breaks into human experience from the outside as the other. Religion is or needs to be “dissimilar” to cultural norms.²⁰ Prayer, as Jacques Derrida once commented, makes theology possible only as the “menace” and “contamination” that first stirs theology.²¹ The sacred is the original “lack” of presence, Mark C. Taylor wrote, “...not the *arche* but the *anarche* that removes the ground that once seemed so secure.”²² These expressions can seem attractive given that they are about post-religion and being beyond religion - and religion in a post-religious world - yet each assumes a hidden orthodoxy in that religion functions - or again is supposed to function - to alter, to be the difference, the other, the outside, or the thought that stings. Each assumes religion is revelation, the particular, that must be peculiar in order to break into life as the inconvenient. The analysis complements an apocalyptic Jesus, who likewise is necessarily, or so it seems, inconvenient in order to be other in the contemporary world. Indeed, one might charge that the analysis complements the long history of Christianity with the apocalyptic Jesus as its norm.

¹⁷ Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 200.

¹⁸ In his 1999 work, *The Jesus Seminar and its Critics*, Robert J. Miller reviews the often acerbic evaluations of the Jesus Seminar by Ben Witherington, Luke Timothy Johnson, Birger Pearson, Howard Kee, Richard Hays, and William Lane Craig.

¹⁹ Howard Clark Kee, “A Century of Quests for the Culturally Compatible Jesus,” *Theology Today* 52:17 (1995), p. 25.

²⁰ John Riches and Ben Quash, commenting on Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *The Modern Theologians*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997, p. 136.

²¹ Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking,” ed. Graham Ward, *The Postmodern God*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997, p. 186.

²² Mark C. Taylor, *About Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, pp. 42-43.

Yet the criticism of convenience is not a criticism that lies beyond thought provoking to constitute thinking. It is too easy to dispel the criticism on the same grounds it is made, employing the same methodology by making mirror image contrary points. In fact an apocalyptic Jesus is the Christian norm and has been at least since the time of Irenaeus. It is certain that an apocalyptic Jesus best suits a culture in love with violence and in admiration of war, which is very many cultures internationally today. An apocalyptic Jesus is not at all "inconvenient" but very much convenient, which many cultural attachés fully know. The apocalyptic Jesus elects governments, stirs revenge, convinces many of the right to bear arms, offers cataclysmic protests against high taxes, and justifies intolerant standards of gender relationships and roles. It is absolutely curious not to notice how normative an apocalyptic Jesus is in both the historic and contemporary political cultures and how fundamentally convenient - if not absolutely orthodox - this version of Jesus is to Christianity as a whole. On the other side of the coin, one can argue how difficult it is to be non-apocalyptic: to practice wisdom, to observe non-violence, and to care for justice. Few can do it, and it has certainly proven "inconvenient" to those who have tried. Since both the apocalyptic (Mark 13) and non-apocalyptic (Good Samaritan parable) Jesus are in the Christian Bible, it is equally the "intentionality" and "comport" of the scholar that opens these two models as authenticity. Both Jesuses are opened by the same methodology. Neither portrait of Jesus constitutes "thinking"; both are history but neither historic.

The Suspicion of Naive Methodology

If the first criticism commonly leveled against the Jesus Seminar is based on the suspicion of convenience, the second one called the suspicion of naiveté is not remarkably different. Naivete marks the tendency to trust innocently that which is of questionable fidelity or at least which ought to be regarded with critical rigour. In the case of criticism directed against the Jesus Seminar, the charge of naiveté comes with the accusation that the Seminar did not understand how their critical methodology predetermined the Jesus that the method opened to the scholar. Accordingly, the Seminar's Jesus is too much like a member of the Greek school of Cynicism, which presumably Seminar members had naively assumed prior to the review of sayings. Richard A. Horsley may represent this view in his two main criticisms of the Seminar. First, Horsley charges that the seminar collectively was predisposed to valuing countercultural icons. This predisposition, in hermeneutical language, is the manner in which the scholar as *Dasein* (the existing present) "uncovers" the "existent" Jesus within the scholar's relationship of intentionality. The scholar, in short, uncovers Jesus on the basis of the scholar's intentional disposition to countercultural value. This basic naiveté is only

augmented for Horsley with yet a second effect, which is the manner in which Dasein's intentionality is the project of Dasein's being in the world. In the context of biblical studies, Horsley holds that the Jesus Seminar has projected a contemporary frame of reference upon antiquity to effectively choose a Jesus already fabricated (pre-fabricated) in the scholar's perception. More recently William Lyons, when reviewing the Seminar's vote of black (improbable) on the Simon of Cyrene appearance at Mark 15:21,²³ summarized, "The simple fact is that individual scholars will view Simon as either fact or fiction because of their pre-existing views on the second evangelist, the burgeoning Jesus movement, the cultural possibilities of the ancient world, and because of their choice of historical-critical method."²⁴ Though Lyons reveals no sophisticated use of hermeneutics, his point is consistent with the charge of naiveté. Scholars tend to rely on selected methodology that already favors or comports their act of uncovering according to their situational intentionality.

Against this critique of naiveté, there are two counter-points to make. One is to notice the inevitability, that is, circularity, of the criticism. The second is found in the simplicity of the critique that serves more to silence criticism than to engage in the critical task at hand. The situation of inevitability rests in the condition of historicity as human factuality. Human beings cannot read or interpret anything without assuming the fact of being in history: this is the condition of historicity. It's impossible not to employ the horizon of the condition of being, framed in and with the technologies of thinking, in the reading of history. This does not make the reading correct or incorrect; it only describes the condition of the reading act. We can say the condition of the reading act, which is the fundamental condition of intentionality in historicity, is ineluctable. To critique a scholar for being in this condition, and thus to be ineluctably tied to the pre-existent, is to accomplish little more than say that the scholar is an actual human being. It does not make a judgement on the success of the methodology employed or on the suitability of the methodology in comparison to alternatives. In effect, Lyons and the general critique of naiveté employs a stalemate tactic to silence critical thinking.

This introduces the second point, which is that the silencing of criticism does not constitute the act of thinking. The job of a scholar is to reach conclusions, to put the cards on the table, and to encourage the development of the subject of study. The job is

²³ In the commentary on this scene, the seminar's collective opinion was expressed with the conclusion, "Black is the correct color for this piece of Marcan fiction." Contrary to Simon Peter, Simon of Cyrene does (literally in the narrative) take up the cross and follow Jesus. Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus*, New York: HarperCollins, 1998, 154-55.

²⁴ Lyons, W. "The Hermeneutics of Fictional Black and Factual Red: the Markan Simon of Cyrene and the Quest for the Historical Jesus," *Journal For The Study Of The Historical Jesus* [serial online], June 2006;4(2):150.

not to silence the subject or to turn conclusions into equivocations. It is naturally the case that in scholarship every conclusion is provisional, but scholarship is not possible without conclusions to be debated. The charge of naiveté works to withdraw scholarship from the forum of debate by drawing every claim of research into the circle of historicity where its sheer humanity can be shamed. The suspicion of naiveté is not thinking, but the silencing of thinking. It is the use of the condition of historicity as a trump card to dismiss the act of thinking, which effectively corners the enterprise of scholarship.

The Suspicion of Perniciousness

The most extreme form in which hermeneutics is used to silence critical thinking comes in the form of the suspicion of perniciousness. At several locations in his book *The Jesus Seminar and its Critics*, Robert Miller touches on this point. Miller refers specifically to Luke Timothy Johnson's insistence that the Jesus Seminar has a preconceived "theological agenda."²⁵ In Johnson's case, that agenda includes specific wishes on the part of Seminar members to have their Jesus and their understanding of Christian origins impact and reshape the tradition of Christianity.²⁶ To this charge, Miller responds, "Does Johnson seriously intend this as a criticism?"²⁷ Every scholar, including Johnson, holds an agenda, and it is exactly consciousness of one's agenda that separates scholarly work from uncritical expression. Every scholar engaged in writing is in a context of intentionality, a point of being in the imagining of the present. This awareness is the strength of scholarship, and it is exactly scholarship that denies such awareness that is most "agenda" driven. Yet, Johnson's critique is not merely uncritical, it also charges the Seminar with a pernicious element. By pernicious I mean that the critic views the Seminar's conclusions with suspicion on the basis that the conclusions hold or imply hidden, and in some ways threatening, elements. Since Johnson appears to be among those who refuse to see their own agenda, the pernicious charge leveled by Johnson is due to the threat he sees in the Jesus Seminar against his own agenda. Johnson interprets the Seminar injuriously, and his reaction accordingly is one that seeks to inflict injury in return.

The suspicious of perniciousness lies in the critique of several other commentators on the work of the Jesus Seminar, though I will limit comments here to a

²⁵ *Jesus Seminar and its Critics*, 85.

²⁶ Johnson makes these points in his book, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996. However, I refer specifically here to Johnson, Luke Timothy, "The Jesus Seminar's Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus." *Christian Century* (January 3-10, 1996), 16-22.

²⁷ *Jesus Seminar and its Critics*, 85,

few examples. Thomas J. J. Altizer suggests the Jesus Seminar has a typically postmodern nihilistic aim, innocently (yet perniciously) assuming a secular Jesus who addresses the new mass culture of the new mass society. The Seminar is not really a scholarly community, neither one of Religious Studies generally nor of historical research particularly, but in place engages in the repackaging and reselling of Religious Studies.²⁸ Altizer lumps the Jesus Seminar into the general category of selling out Religious Studies to the mass culture of postmodern society and, consequently, usurping the task of religious scholarship to voice the “other,” that is, the different or peculiar vision of humanity deeply rooted in religion. Altizer practices a hermeneutical suspicion of perniciousness because he voices his concern from a stance set against postmodern culture and sees the Seminar as a benign yet deliberate selling out of religion through mass appeal.

A similar suspicion of perniciousness arise in the comments of A.J. Grant who contrasts Rudolf Bultmann’s (1884 - 1976) modern program of demythologizing with Giambattista Vico’s (1668 - 1774) valuing of myth and finds Bultmann and modern Form Criticism lacking. Grant reduces modern biblical criticism strictly to Enlightenment rationalism, and in this he attempts to pose Form Criticism as the overt attempt to value “logos” (reason) both above and prior to “mythos” (story). While, I would argue, misappropriating Derrida, he thinks Form Criticism is guilty of logocentrism.²⁹ Bultmann’s program consequently diminishes the lasting value of story in an overcompensating rationalism that attempts to “...oppose history to myth.”³⁰ This critique carries over to the Jesus Seminar. The Seminar, too (to Grant), misses the value

²⁸ Though Altizer specifically mentions the Jesus Seminar and its portrayal of a secular Jesus, his overall criticism is directed at Religious Studies as a discipline. He is critical of a new mass appeal, or perceived attempt at this, understanding such an appeal as a benign form of nihilism. Altizer does not define what he means by nihilism but relies on his reader’s interpretation of that term. The term, though, can mean several things - even in Nietzsche, upon whom Altizer relies. It can mean the technical repetition of the same (this being the “mass appeal” form and its boredom), but it can also be the revolutionary overthrow of stable meanings (such as class structures) based on the revelation of emptiness as a key to human imagination and productivity (this is its Marxist-existential form). Altizer appears to mean the first definition, which accounts for his critique of Religious Studies as nihilism based on mass appeal (and for his critique of the hidden secular agenda of the Jesus Seminar). I draw this reading from Altizer’s seemingly sarcastic comments, “Yet if postmodernity is calling forth a new mass culture and a new mass society, it might well be that this alone could make possible a genuine understanding of a truly natural or even truly human religion, one which would be impossible to understand in “deep” thinking and scholarship, a thinking wholly alien from the great body of humanity.” Thomas J.J. Altizer, “The Challenge of Nihilism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 62,4 (1994), 1020.

²⁹ A.J. Grant. “Vico and Bultmann on Myth: the Problem with Demythologizing,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 30, 4 (2000), 72, note 4.

³⁰ Grant, 64.

of myth. It misses how myth is the invention of cultural experience portrayed in rhetoric, how, for example, the Gospel of Mark is a “parable-myth” addressing the readers (and ironically juxtaposing the outside reader - who gets it - with the inside disciples of Mark who do not get it).³¹ Missing this, what should be, truly obvious point, the Jesus Seminar is guilty of a technical Enlightenment reading that reduces the story of Jesus, through Form Criticism, to “a small pile of pieces” (that is, various parables and aphorisms).³² Finally, Grant not only raises the popular hermeneutical criticism that scholars see in Jesus who they want to see, but also, implying a pernicious interpretation of the Seminar, questions how members of the Seminar could even be so “audacious” as to “attempt to say anything” about the conclusions of form critical scholarship.³³ Grant inadvertently employs censorship not to critique but silence the Seminar and stigmatize its conclusions.

Yet again, the criticism is not only unfounded but also poorly motivated. In the first place, it is evidently ironic that Grant employs “demythologizing” in order to critique it. After all, he first has to explain to the contemporary reader what Mark’s myth is before he can criticize Bultmann’s program, an act which upholds exactly Bultmann’s point. If we did not have to explain ancient myths to modern people in order for modern people to understand them, then we would not need to demythologize the gospels. Grant has to explain Mark’s myth!

Beyond the irony, Grant’s accusation that the Seminar constructs a positivist version of Jesus and, in the process, both misunderstands myth and echoes Enlightenment rationalism is simply not true. Neither the Seminar specifically nor biblical scholarship generally has held a rationalist view since the time of David Friedrich Strauss in the early 19th century. Strauss already understood that the rationalism characteristic of an earlier generation of historical Jesus researchers, for example Reimarus, was misguided. Understanding the Bible means understanding ancient mythic or world order. It is impossible to employ Hermes, let us say, without some acknowledgement of the differing worldview inhabited by the inquirer and the source. The 19th century breakthrough was exactly that the biblical world operated on the foundation of a different myth. Antiquity had issues fundamentally at odds with modern experience. But what Grant overlooks most egregiously is the inevitability of this difference and the impossibility of canceling it. It is absolutely true that modern science is a “myth” in the sense that, like any other era, it is knowledge structured on basic metaphorical relationships to world experience. Quantum physics deals with

³¹ Grant, 70.

³² Grant, 76, quoting from Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: the Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*.

³³ Grant, 69.

things no one can actually experience but things that can be metaphorically presented in mathematical models. Those models can be used to interact with reality as a means to interpret what is observed in a particle accelerator, but that interactivity is based on mythic imagination (that is, models that structure - *vorzeichnen* - the horizon of experience). In place of water structuring the unseen, as Thales long ago proposed, we have particles and waves. Both ways of structuring reality work - or did work, in Thales' case - in their time, but this does not mean that they are equally effective myths. It is misleading for Grant to create a situation where either the ancient myth is wholly accepted (and the sources are read only on this platform) or else the reader is guilty of projecting Enlightenment rationalism on the source. This reading of perniciousness leaves no ground for subtlety and shows almost no awareness of advances in biblical criticism since the 19th century.

In the case of Bultmann it is not that one must displace the mythological worldview of the Bible with modern sensibilities but that one must translate (carry across, meta-phor) the ancient worldview into modern sensibilities. It is a dialogue of worldviews that Bultmann sought to establish. Yet that dialogue is still constituted on a few simple points. One is that modern people do not think like ancient people - we do not structure the world like ancient people and we do not anticipate the world like ancient people. There is not much we can do about this difference, but certainly, whatever else, there is no point in attempting to reconstitute antiquity in modern times.

When it comes to the historical Jesus, scholars do have to accept the form of myth Jesus lived in as a figure of history and also understand the mythic presentation of Jesus in the gospels. The gospels as mythical forms are anticipations (that is, worldviews) of the historic meaning of Jesus. But this insight is not opposite to the task of relating the Jesus tradition to the contemporary mythic construct. The theological task in relation to Jesus becomes historic when and if the historical Jesus impacts the contemporary mythical world. It might be said with equal conviction that only a historical Jesus, that is, a human Jesus, is capable of delivering the historic to the contemporary theological world, for this (de-ontologized and de-mythologized) Jesus can inspire the task of thinking theology in our time.

Thinking and the Historic Jesus

The Jesus Seminar was not guilty of a hermeneutics of convenience nor of naive methodology; it did not carry a hidden agenda. To the contrary the Seminar was aware of these hermeneutical troubles and published this awareness consistently. If there was a shortcoming to the work of the Seminar it is that beyond the question of the historical Jesus there was reluctance to think Jesus in historic ways. Some scholars of the Seminar

ventured to define such questions,³⁴ but largely the question remained on the horizon. Theologians meanwhile tended to dismiss the question of the historical Jesus based on the hermeneutical presuppositions named above.

What is thinking with the Jesus Seminar as opposed to being thought provoking through criticism of the Jesus Seminar? Thinking a question is a philosophical challenge that involves taking a question further, moving it to the next phase, even imagining it in what had been unimaginable ways before the initial question was asked. Since the Jesus Seminar asked the question about the historical Jesus, what was the unimaginable in the question? This is the challenge of thinking.

There are two distinct forms of thinking that come out of the unimagined in the work of Jesus Seminar. One involves "event philosophy," which in postmodern thought has become a significant analytical tool; a second involves the deep question of the future of religion as a human value. The latter question moves religion from its traditional ontological foundation of thinking to a new epistemological foundation that problematizes thinking. The Seminar as a collective did not consider the implications of shifting from ontology, even though this is a helpful analysis, nor raise epistemological problems about the historic question of the historical Jesus.

Event philosophy, as I understand it,³⁵ is an epistemologically rather than ontologically based hermeneutic. The ontological basis of hermeneutics involves the priority of being, the presence of reality as the complex relationship of beings, and how being is assumed in the question of being (and before a statement about being can be made). Much of theological history is based on the ontological priority in the question concerning meaning. In classical understanding, life is about finding stability in the movement of being by determining, despite the protest of Heraclitus, a fixed, immovable, point. God in the classical sense worked well as this absolute point of nothingness, that is, the point beyond essence and existence or beyond the accidental shifts of *existentia* where both quality and potentiality are transcended in the (or as) *Actus Purus*. Reality in this way of thinking is not an event but rather *energeia* ordered as *logos*, and the question concerns the source of *energeia* and the reliability of *logos*. This can be seen in Aquinas' five ways, which always presuppose a trust in the order of reality to deliver a opening point to the source of reality. The source for Aquinas was

³⁴ In my experience, these scholars included Robert Funk, Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, Roy Hoover, Brandon Scott, Hal Taussig, and two philosophical theologians, Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering.

³⁵ The "event" analysis offered here is based on my book about Michel Foucault and philosophical theology entitled, *Archives and the Event of God*. Montreal: McGill-Queens Press, 2011. Slavoj Žižek in the recent publication *Event* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014) defines the event as that which "...is a change of the very frame through which we perceive the world and engage in it" (p. 10).

gained through revelation, that is, revelation of the priority of Absolute Being that cannot belong to the order of beings but that in the order of beings can be understood as that necessarily pregiven to the question. In modern theology, Paul Tillich expressed the priority of Absolute Being as the Ground of Being necessarily present in the question of being and as the solution to the meaning of (and angst about) being.³⁶

Event philosophy is contrasted with ontological philosophy because it upholds the priority of epistemology as a socio-political event, that is, as the reading of being and, more importantly, the reading of the significance of being. The ontological question concerning meaning is not possible outside of socio-political setting that has already produced the location of the reading and the structure of the question. The setting creates the significance, makes possible the historic in the midst of history. In another way, every reading of ontology is already a "technology," as Michel Foucault provocatively put it.³⁷ He meant that the question of being belongs to the epistemic production of the location from where the question is posed. The question of being is never "non-local," never absolute, never less than the activity of the technology, the technique, that makes it possible and, consequently, makes it historic. A third way to say this is that every interpretive act, including ontological readings, is an epistemic event. It seems that, after all, the god Hermes does not deliver messages but codes. Hermes is a messenger involved in the coding of the socio-political reasoning of an ontological order. Hermes is an epistemic event rather than an ontological relay.

In relation to the Jesus Seminar and the historic nature of the historical Jesus, how was Christianity an event? That is to say, how did the epistemic experience of Christianity come to be manufactured in the socio-political power structure of Imperial Roman culture? What was the epistemic reading that early Christianity projected onto Roman Imperial ontology? Members of the Jesus Seminar hinted at an answer when focussing on the parables of Jesus. In many published documents by individual members like Crossan or Scott, the parables of Jesus were conceived as epistemic readings that stood out as transgressive appropriations of the ontological order. Funk also offered this insight in plain language when he concluded that "very few of Jesus' pronouncements constitute practical advice." We can translate practical advice as ontological advice, which is advice about how to be in the default world. In place, Funk explained, the sayings of Jesus have to do with something less often considered, and that is "how one is disposed to the things that really matter."³⁸ Funk's turn of phrase displaces the question of how to be in the world with how to be "disposed" to the world,

³⁶ Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952.

³⁷ See Michel Foucault, "The Political Technology of Individuals" in *Technologies of the Self* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

³⁸ Robert Funk, *Honest to Jesus*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996, p. 159.

which is not the ontological but epistemological question: it is the question about being in the world transgressively rather than simply being in the world - a question about life as event rather than life as being. In parable, one is located in life by means of the story such that the location is changed, transgressed, or "re-imagined" (as Scott wrote).³⁹ To be located transgressively is to be not of the order of things, not of the "ontology" of things, and this "not" is the definition of thinking. The historic question that can emerge from the Jesus Seminar is the question about how to be transgressive in the socio-political power structure of contemporary ontology. How is one an "event" rather than a being, a location rather than a recollection?

In some cases, at the edge of its deliberations, Seminar scholars ask questions that approach the epistemological priority indicated above. In some cases the question about the historical Jesus was about Jesus as an "event" rather than a specific individual. This is evident in the way that uncovering the historical Jesus was finally not about a person but a voiceprint. It was about, in this subtle way, finding an identifiably transgressive location. This does not mean, as some scholars imagine, finding a convivial counter-cultural hero for modern times, but rather about discovering if the historical Jesus is epistemologically identifiable. This same question followed the Seminar into works on Paul and the origins of Christianity. Is Christianity - one might add in its diverse forms - epistemologically identifiable as a transgressive option in the cultural setting of the Roman *imperium*? This was the type of question pursued by Crossan in *God and Empire*.⁴⁰ It shifts the question of the historical Jesus and the rise of Christianity from an ontological to epistemological foundation. It potentially re-introduces the historic to the history of religion. But one must add, in the face of this, few theologians were listening and few philosophers of religion cared, whether due to ontologically based hermeneutics getting in the way or to misunderstanding the question as historical rather than historic.

In response to this silence, one might recognize the altered form of questioning and think about the significance of religion as an event rather than an ontological order. It is possible in this spirit to explore religion on two fronts. One is to examine the history of religion as the production of God. This means understanding eras of human history primarily as an epistemological activity that produces an ontological order. While it is indeed imperative to understand the ontological order, that is, the interplay of cultural markers within a society, it is even more fundamental to understand how that order produces events of epistemic dimension. Only in the latter case is religion examined as a human product whose past and future value can be questioned.

³⁹ *Re-Imagine the World*. Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2001.

⁴⁰ John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.

This leads to a second claim when imagining the value of religion as an event. If religion is the consequent projecting of the epistemic imagination upon the horizon as ontology, a conclusion that is both the spirit of Feuerbach and the proclamation of Nietzsche, then religion is fundamentally imaginary. It is the great non-existent of human experience that orders experience out of nothing and exerts power both toward and over it. The value of religion rests in the way it is imagined. And this is a liberty of thinking that the Seminar, on many fronts, never knew it was inspiring. The revelation of religion is its emptiness, its no-being, but the emptiness is the reason religion can be re-imagined value. Religion is thinking. It is the transgressive task of re-imagining the question set in the epistemic horizons of the existent who faces an ontological order.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show in this essay that the hermeneutical critique of biblical studies of the type the Jesus Seminar engaged is often unfounded. Common criticisms directed at the Jesus Seminar are basic ones that can be successfully applied to most subjects and most scholars. The criticisms do not constitute thinking about religion but rather express clever analyses easily dispelled.

In contrast to its critics, the Jesus Seminar not only offered a picture of the historical Jesus for debate but also implied a complementary relationship between biblical criticism and hermeneutical philosophy. This relationship may have arose unintentionally, but it comes to the fore when the question is thinking with the Seminar rather than merely critiquing it. Thinking with the Seminar means moving beyond the Seminar and picking up implications that were left as fragmentary notes within the proceedings. Event Philosophy is one way to pick up the fragments and think new questions with its emphasis on epistemology prior to ontology. With this shifted priority, the question concerning religion changes from ontological order to epistemological event.

The change of priority raises the possibility of understanding religion as thinking: a transgressive location that holds its value insofar as its very emptiness creates the possibility of a reimagined horizontal project. Out of the contention between biblical studies and hermeneutics, then, arises the potential of thinking the event of religion as a transgressive value for humanity.