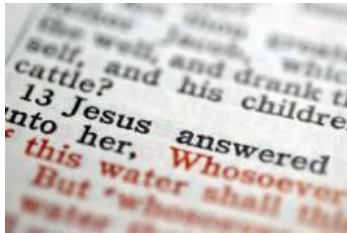


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Christianity vs. Jesusanity — The Postmodern Temptation

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The most hard-core forms of postmodern thought are generally limited to academic campuses, but the postmodern worldview is trickling down in various forms to the popular level. While postmodern literary theorists debate the meaning of “totalizing metanarratives,” at the level of popular piety we see the widespread substitution of “spirituality” for biblical Christianity.

In this sense, spirituality is a project centered in the self and constantly negotiable — more about “meaning” than truth. Where does Jesus Christ fit in all this? Darrell L. Bock and Daniel B. Wallace argue that popular culture is on a quest “to unseat the biblical Christ.” They make their case in *Dethroning Jesus* [Thomas Nelson].

As Bock and Wallace explain, classical biblical Christianity is being replaced by “Jesusanity.” In their words:

“Jesusanity” is a coined term for the alternative story about Jesus. Here the center of the story is still Jesus, but Jesus as either a prophet or a teacher of religious wisdom. In Jesusanity, Jesus remains very much Jesus of Nazareth. He points the way to God and leads people into a journey with God. His role is primarily one of teacher, guide, and example. Jesus’ special status involves his insight into the human condition and the enlightenment he brings to it. There is no enthronement of Jesus at God’s side, only the power of his teaching and example. In this story, the key is that Jesus inspires others, but there is no throne for him. He is one among many – the best, perhaps, and one worthy to learn from and follow.

Biblical Christianity teaches that Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine. Thus, Jesus does not need to be “humanized.” As the Apostle Paul taught in Philippians 2:5-11, Jesus humbled Himself to take on full and authentic humanity. So, the real issue in Jesusanity is not humanizing Jesus, but denying His deity. Christianity and Jesusanity tell two different stories and represent two very different faiths. As Bock and Wallace explain:

Both of these stories afford Jesus a great deal of respect, but they are very different stories in regard to his importance. In one, Jesus is worshipped. In the other, he is simply respected. In one, he is intimately associated with God. In the other, he points to God. In one he is the Way. In the other, he shows the way. We cannot understand the public discussion about Jesus without understanding that the discussion entails these two distinct stories.

Dethroning Jesus comes in the wake of much cultural conversation and media attention devoted to the so-called gospels of Judas and Thomas and the collection generally known as the Gnostic gospels. These texts, never accepted by the Church as Scripture, do present very different understandings of Jesus than that taught by the Apostles and confessed by orthodox Christians. These different understandings are now represented by very different portraits of Jesus in the postmodern public square. As Bock and Wallace argue:

The portrait of Jesus in the public square has led to two stories about Jesus, and this despite the fact that both of these stories have often been called Christianity. One is Christianity, while the other is Jesusanity. The distinction between the two stories has surfaced for a variety of reasons, the most relevant of which we have sought to trace in this first overview. Four basic areas have contributed to the rise of these two different portraits of Jesus: (1) historical skepticism, (2) new imagination, (3) cultural factors that have changed how we assess things, and (4) the innate desire in people to seek,

cope with or understand the spiritual. Within these four areas are twelve distinct factors: (1) skepticism about institutional religion of all sorts, (2) the rise of higher criticism, (3) the new finds in archaeology, (4) a larger sea change in the way we view history (written by winners/losers), (5) a selective appeal to ancient evidence, (6) the way Christianity is taught in many religious study programs, (7) increasing media attention, (8) the appeal of public-square crossover novels, (9) the intrigue of the pursuit of a spiritual journey, (10) the cultural desire to acknowledge religious diversity, (11) the growing recognition that religion motivates people, and (12) a brittle fundamentalism.

Each of these factors plays a part, but the “increasing media attention” is surely a major factor. Much of this attention is superficial and sloppy. The National Geographic Society, for example, should be embarrassed by its sensationalism in promoting exaggerated and misleading claims about the Gospel of Judas in its magazine and on television. The authors of *Dethroning Jesus* helpfully debunk many of the confusing claims made in recent years, answering those who assail the integrity of the New Testament and those who promote sensationalistic claims such as the discovery of the “lost tomb of Jesus.”

Of course, more is at stake here than a battle over rival intellectual understandings of Jesus. As Bock and Wallace acknowledge, “Christianity is not Jesusanity for a reason. Jesus is about more than ideas.” We must never depreciate the urgency of getting the doctrine right and understanding Jesus Christ as the Bible presents Him. But Jesus demands faith, not just correct knowledge.

Jesusanity fits the postmodern mind and the postmodern mood, but it cannot save. We really do not know what Christianity is if we do not also understand what it is *not*.

