

The Hidden Story of Jesus

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Abstract

On Christmas Day 2007, Channel Four took its viewers for two hours on an alleged search for 'the real Jesus'. The programme largely failed to introduce any real experts; there were errors and painful gaps in the 'information' provided; there was hardly any recognition that, over and over again, there was another side to the positions being presented. Among the fantasies once again trotted out was Jesus' supposed life and death in India, a 'thesis' that was invented without a shred of evidence in the 1890s. The presenter repeatedly pushed theories about early followers of Jesus reworking beliefs and practices from Gnostic and other sources. St Paul was portrayed as the 'real' founder of Christianity, without a word being said about this view being proposed and long ago refuted. The poor quality of this programme was astounding. One expects something much better, especially on Christmas Day.

Keywords

Doctrine, Gnostics, India, Jesus, Paul.

When I watch television documentaries in the area of art, medicine, astronomy, archeology and other such fields, I expect the material to be presented by a competent expert, someone who knows the field well, brings in comments from recognized authorities, and gives time to both sides when controversial issues arise. Normally these documentaries deserve good or even high marks on all those counts and prove to be an enjoyable and educational hour or two. But in the area of religion, documentaries, with some notable exceptions, regularly fail to reach such reasonable quality. If I bother now to watch religious programmes, my worst fears are generally fulfilled.

In its last Christmas Day feature, "The Hidden Story of Jesus," Channel 4 took its viewers on an alleged search for "the real Jesus." The programme ended with some interesting minutes on Gandhi and then with a moving appeal for truth, justice and human rights in the Holy Land. But, alas, so much of what had gone before in this two-hour "documentary" was of poor quality, if not worse.

I realize that some TV programmes aim to be provocative, and there is much good in being provocative, provided such programmes (1) introduce real experts in the field(s), (2) avoid errors and painful gaps in the information that backs up a case being made, and (3) honestly allow viewers to recognize that there is another side to the position being put forward.

On all three grounds that Christmas Day feature presented by Dr Robert Beckford of Oxford Brookes University suffered from serious defects.

As regards (1), there were worthwhile interviews with one or two people (e.g. the Jewish rabbi who was pleading the cause of some Palestinians). But I puzzled over bringing in Duncan Derrett as an expert on Buddhism. He has been a professor of law, and has dabbled in New Testament studies, sometimes with ridiculous results (see his 1982 book *The Anastasis*). In the UK there is no lack of real experts on Buddhism: e.g. Damien Keown, whose OUP book *Buddhism. A Very Short Introduction* has proved one of the top sellers in that excellent series.

Another “expert,” an old gentlemen interviewed in Srinagar about the so-called tomb of Jesus showed how he lives in an odd world of fantasy and misinformation. He not only touted the completely fictional story about Jesus’ Indian connection but also alleged that Chinese, Sanskrit and Tibetan sources contain valuable, new information on Jesus and that documents about Jesus’ Kashmir connection go back to “the second century.” That was fantastic news... Let’s have all that documentation as soon as possible, please! The truth, however, is very different.

Back in 1894 Nicolas Notovitch through *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* created the first part of Jesus’ “Indian connection”: he alleged that Jesus spent some pre-ministry years in India. The second half of the legend was added by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in an 1899 book in Urdu. According to him Jesus was saved from the cross, went to Kashmir and eventually died there at the age of 120 years in Srinagar. The entire Indian connection was created, without a shred of evidence, by these two authors. But sadly, every now and then, unscrupulous or at least seriously misinformed folk continue to feed the story to a gullible public. The creation of this whole legend is told (and debunked effectively) in Günter Grönbold, *Jesus in Indien: das Ende einer Legende* (Munich: Kösel Verlag, 1985). I found it seriously and unacceptably misleading when the Channel 4 programme assured us that this legend created just over one hundred years ago was an “ancient tradition.”

(2) The presenter of the programme made clear errors at times: e.g. when he confused the immaculate conception (of the Virgin Mary) with the virginal conception (of Jesus). His “exegesis” of two passages from the New Testament was simply bizarre and

self-serving. We were assured that by his words in John 10: 16 about “other sheep who are not of this fold,” Jesus intended to say that there are “other ways to God just as valid” as Christianity. Dr Beckford, if he does not want to consult the outstanding commentators on John’s Gospel, should at least read the words that follow in the same verse of John’s text, where Jesus says: “I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” Does that sound like “other ways to God that are just as valid”?

In 1 Corinthians 9: 19–23, Paul explained his policy of consideration and tact in dealing with obligations of the Mosaic law (about food and circumcision) that had been causing difficulties between Jewish and Gentile Christians: “I have become all things to all people.” Dr Beckford interpreted this as meaning that, in developing Christian dogma, Paul felt free to borrow beliefs from pagan religions. Beckford should try out this “explanation” on Anthony Thiselton, Joseph Fitzmyer, Gordon Fee or other scholarly commentators on 1 Corinthians and hear their reaction to this nonsense.

The programme proposed as startling and important new discoveries a raft of theories that have been tried many years ago (sometimes several centuries ago) and found seriously wanting by scholars of different backgrounds: for instance, a) that the multiple incarnations of Krishna truly parallel Christ’s once and for all incarnation; b) that we can discount many differences to allege “remarkable” resemblances between Jesus and the Buddha; c) that the Christian beliefs (and practices) about Jesus’ once and for all resurrection were somehow taken from the yearly celebrations of the return from the dead of an Egyptian fertility deity, Osiris, the husband of Isis.

Does Dr Beckford know how much the pursuit of parallels between Christianity and other religions was carried on during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? But many scholars have long ago abandoned this “parallelomania” (which often exaggerated the importance of trifling resemblances) and stress nowadays the distinctive and sometimes irreducible characteristics of different religions.

(3) The presenter pushed the theory that Christianity reworked beliefs and practices from the worship of Mithras, a cult popular among soldiers in the late Roman Empire. At best he allowed only a hint that many scholars hold the opposite position: the worship of Mithras took beliefs and practices from Christianity.

Repeatedly positions were put forward with very little or no recognition that numerous experts do not agree. For instance, high claims were made for the Gnostic “gospels” discovered after the Second World War in Nag Hammadi (Egypt). The presenter declared these Gnostic texts to be “one the greatest discoveries in Christian history.” They include the so-called “Gospel of Thomas.” We were told that this text “is thought to have been written in the first century.”

Certainly there are some, maverick authors who think so. But the majority of scholars date the writing of this and other Gnostic texts to the late second century or to the third century. These texts are much too late to throw light on the origins of Christianity. They show us how correct St Irenaeus (died around 200) was in his account and rejection of the Gnostic groups that departed from mainstream Christianity and produced new, alleged “revelations” to promote the idea of salvation as the soul’s escape from an evil, material world. The vast majority of scholars of all backgrounds consider the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (1947–56) to be far more important than what was found at Nag Hammadi. The Scrolls throw much light on the transmission of the scriptures and other aspects of Jewish life at the time of Jesus.

By spending time on the Gnostic texts discovered in Egypt after World War II, Dr Beckford obviously offered a Gnostic “take” on Jesus. In this view redemption consists in a special knowledge or “gnosis” that will enable the human spirit to escape from the body and life on earth. This belief can hardly be reconciled with what was implied in the documentary’s section on Gandhi (struggle non-violently for political freedom in this life) or the section on the oppression of Palestinians (stand up for human rights and dignity). One would have to work hard to present Gnostics of the second and third century as champions of human freedom and other rights.

Repeatedly it was alleged that Christianity is “largely based on” St Paul and his followers, who invented the doctrines about the divine identity of Jesus. Dr Beckford never let slip a hint that this theory of Paul as the “real” founder of Christianity has been proposed at least since the eighteenth century – a theory that has been repeatedly refuted. Many scholars (and not just Christian ones) point to the high, divine claims that Jesus made during his ministry: claims, for instance, about his authority to change the divine law, to forgive sins, and to act as the final judge for all human beings. As a leading American Jewish scholar, Jacob Neusner, recognized in his *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (2000), only God could demand what Jesus asks. Years before Paul came on the scene, high claims about the identity of Jesus go back not only to the first Christians (who believed Jesus to be divine Lord and Son of God) but also to Jesus himself.

At the end Dr Beckford made a moving appeal to oppose injustice and oppression and stand up for truth, justice and human rights. But, in doing so, he discounted doctrines (“dogmas” that should be “stripped away” as unfortunate additions made by Paul and his followers). “What really matters” is promoting liberation and justice. But surely Beckford might have allowed that many modern martyrs, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Archbishop Oscar Romero, opposed injustice and stood up for human rights precisely because of their belief in Jesus as the incarnate Son of God. Far from being a distraction

from the real tasks in life, such belief in basic doctrines supports action for the oppressed of this world. It is these doctrines that have given deep strength and lasting courage to innumerable Christian men and women who have worked for the victims of our world and sometimes lost their lives in the cause.

I feel sad writing in this way about the poor standard of this and many other religious programmes. I expected much better quality from the Channel 4 documentary shown last Christmas as well as from the one (also presented by Dr Beckford) on the family of Jesus at Christmas 2006. On neither occasion did his enthusiasm and charm make up for serious limits in scholarly knowledge, a failure to use recognized experts, and an unbalanced (many would say quite unfair) presentation of the material. Surely we have a right to expect that TV documentaries in the area of religion will come up to the reasonable or even high standard of programmes in other fields.

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