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"The Jesus Seminar Resurrects the Old (Secularizing) Quest"

Introduction

To appreciate fully the work of the Jesus Seminar, it must be understood as standing within the tradition of quests for the historical Jesus. But what type of quest is the Jesus Seminar? The Jesus Seminar is an anomaly in the Third Quest,¹ and though it has roots in the New Quest, it is distinct from that quest.² The Seminar is best understood as a remake of the Old Quest, which can rightly be characterized as a secularizing quest. Although the Jesus Seminar

¹The Third Quest attempts to locate Jesus firmly within the milieu of first century Palestine, but the Jesus Seminar pursues a Jesus who is completely dissimilar from his socio-historical context. Whereas the Third Quest exhibits confidence in the general historical reliability of the canonical gospels, the Jesus Seminar takes the position of radical skepticism. The Third Quest has discovered a Jesus who is very Jewish, while the Jesus Seminar has identified Jesus as a hellenized cynic sage. Funk would agree that the Jesus Seminar is an anomaly in the Third Quest. From Funk's perspective, however, the Jesus Seminar alone is doing serious Jesus research while scholars of the Third Quest are merely "pretend questers." Funk believes that the Third Quest is nothing more than an "apologetic ploy" to substantiate traditional Christianity. See Robert Funk, *Honest To Jesus: Jesus For a New Millennium* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996): 64-65.

²Some scholars identify the Jesus Seminar as a continuation of the New Quest (e.g., N. T. Wright), but this is simply not so. To be sure, the Seminar shares common characteristics with the New Quest, e.g., radical skepticism, criterion of dissimilarity, and privileging the sayings. These characteristics, however, are due more to the fact that these two quests share a common Bultmannian heritage. What distinguishes the Jesus Seminar from the New Quest is largely its motivation. While the New Quest sought continuity between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, the Jesus Seminar attempts to overthrow the latter. Moreover, the New Quest retained the Christ of faith as the proper object of Christian faith, but the Jesus Seminar asserts that the teachings of the historical Jesus should be that object. Funk refers to the Jesus Seminar's efforts as the "reNEWed quest," acknowledging that the New Quest was a precursor to the Jesus Seminar, even though the two quests are distinct. See Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 64.

and the Old Quest are analogous, this does not mean that they are identical.³ In spite of minor differences, however, the points of contact between the Jesus Seminar and the Old Quest indicate that the Seminar is following in the footsteps of the Old Quest. This ought to be troubling since the Old Quest failed due to its defective historiography. Criticisms of its historical motivation, method, and results were largely responsible for the demise of the Old Quest. To the extent that the Seminar participates in the Old (Secularizing) Quest, it is in danger of committing the same errors.

A. Historical Motivation: Secularization

1. Secularization and the Rise of the Old Quest

It was largely the Enlightenment that gave rise to the Old Quest's pursuit of the historical Jesus. In particular, it was the disdain for traditional Christian beliefs that served as a catalyst for the Old Quest. The attacks on traditional beliefs can be seen as a part of secularization. In his *History of Theology* (1968), Bengt Hägglund observed, "The culture of the Enlightenment was distinguished by its increasing secularization. The new form of natural science pointed toward an immanent explanation of the world. A secular culture developed, independent of church and confessions."⁴ Hägglund has identified four characteristics of this secularization. First,

³Four characteristics distinguish the Jesus Seminar from the Old Quest, the first two of which are unique to the Seminar: collaborative effort and commitment to publicity. The second two distinct characteristics are strictly chronological, meaning that they probably would have been true of the Old Quest. The Jesus Seminar uses critical tools that were unavailable during the Old Quest, e.g., form criticism, redaction criticism, and criterion of dissimilarity. The Seminar also uses extracanonical writings that were not available back then, particularly the Gospel of Thomas.

⁴Bengt Hägglund, *History of Theology* (Trans. Gene Lund. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968): 328.

secularism emphasized rational (natural) religion, in which divine revelation was either rejected or subordinated to reason. Second, secularism tended to moralize, i.e., reduce religion to the promotion of good morals. Third, secularism advanced individualism in that religion became a private matter to be determined not by ecclesiastical authority but by personal reason. Fourth, secularism advanced humanism which emphasized interest in "this-worldly" concerns. Since all knowledge is attained by the scientific method, according to the secularist, religious (spiritual and supernatural) claims were deemed invalid. Secularism, then, can be understood as the attempt to remove all vestiges of ancient myths and superstition from each area of life, particularly the religious. Secularists were especially troubled that religions, including Christianity, were distracting people from "this-worldly" interests (e.g., science, politics, charity) by proclaiming "other-worldly" concerns (e.g., the supernatural, the spiritual realm, the after-life). To remedy this situation, secularists attempted to establish a secular Christianity more in line with rational (natural) religion.

The rational (natural) religion that arose to challenge the revealed religion of Christianity was Deism. Deists believed that God created the universe as a first cause but has since allowed creation to unfold according to inherent laws and principles. Like an "absentee landlord," God is distant (transcendent) and does not intervene in human affairs. Deists rejected divine revelation and miracles, and attacked the church for proclaiming them. The goal of Deists was to rid the world of institutionalized religion in favor of a secular religion that would validate science by providing an intelligent Creator, and insure social order through natural law ethics.

An American example of Deism can be found in Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826). Like the European Deists, Jefferson rejected the miracle stories in the gospels and focused on the

ethical teachings of Jesus. Jefferson actually put this theory into practice by literally cutting out the miraculous from the gospels and pasting Jesus' ethics into a journal. The result was: "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted Textually from the Gospels" (1805).⁵ In an 1813 letter to John Adams, Jefferson revealed his methodology: "I have performed this operation for my own use, by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book, and by arranging the matter which is evidently his [Jesus'], and which is as distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill."⁶

The attempts of Deists to undermine traditional Christianity were in part successful due to their numerous polemics in pamphlets, articles, and books. Historian Roland Stromberg correctly observes, "The deistic writers, who were shrewd propogandists, while they failed to establish their positive creed, perhaps succeeded in what may have been their chief intent, to embarrass and discredit traditional Christianity."⁷ One of the reasons the Deists failed to advance their religion is that the masses of people were not as "noble minded." But this created a problem for the Deists, because they believed that reason was universally accessible. Stromberg offers this insight:

Deists alleged that all men have within them the light of reason enabling them to perceive all necessary religious truths without the unworthy crutch of revelation; but, on the other hand, almost all of them added that in fact most men do not have such ability, only the enlightened few do. To reconcile the contradiction they were driven to assert (a typical deistic utterance) that a conspiracy of priests had

⁵Most recently published as, Thomas Jefferson, *The Jefferson Bible* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

⁶Ibid., 17. A quick comparison of Jefferson's work with the Jesus Seminar's *The Five Gospels* (1993) reveals Jefferson as a clear predecessor. Although the methods differ, at least in theory, the motivation and results are surprisingly similar.

⁷Roland Stromberg, *An Intellectual History of Modern Europe* (2nd edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1975): 127.

corrupted mankind and kept them in bondage.⁸

In the end, Deism was the religion of the intelligensia (intellectual elite) and never became popular with the masses. Although Deists were committed to the secularization of religion, they failed to undermine traditional Christianity. Nonetheless, it was the commitment to a secular Christianity that gave rise to the Old Quest for the historical Jesus. For, if the Christ of faith (Jesus in canon and creed) was no longer tenable for the modern world, some Enlightenment thinkers reasoned, then perhaps the historical Jesus could be called upon to salvage the Christian religion.

There can be no doubt that the Old Quest was largely motivated by a desire to overthrow the traditional portrait of Jesus, namely, the Christ of faith. Scholars of the Old Quest were convinced that this Jesus was a mythical figure in whom belief was no longer tenable or relevant for modern men and women. In contrast to this Christ of faith, these scholars constructed a historical Jesus, whom they believed to be more viable as the proper object of Christian faith. With the use of recently developed critical tools, these scholars believed that their efforts were not only historically possible, but intellectually necessary if Christianity was to survive in the modern (secular) world. In spite of this perceived necessity, the church continued to propagate the Christ-myth in both canon and creed. This perpetuation of a supernatural Jesus was epitomized by the church's formulation of Chalcedonian christology. It would seem, from the perspective of Old Quest scholars, that the church was the final bastion for the unenlightened. Nonetheless, these scholars were committed to rescuing the historical Jesus from the shackles of church dogma. In so doing, they hoped to provide an alternate portrait of Jesus, one that was

⁸Ibid., 130.

historically and rationally viable for the modern world.

From the perspective of Old Quest scholars, the early church betrayed the Jesus tradition and distorted the message of Jesus. Regarding those first disciples, Hermann Reimarus wrote, "[they] strayed completely from their master in their teaching and in their lives, abandoning his religion and his intention and introducing a completely new system."⁹ Reimarus believed that following Jesus' death the disciples stole the body and proclaimed Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Their motive, according to Reimarus, was to continue enjoying the power and prestige to which they had become accustomed while following Jesus. Christianity, then, originated not with Jesus but with the disciples. Reimarus, like other Old Quest scholars, credited the apostle Paul with the final corruption of the Jesus tradition. For it was Paul, more than the Evangelists, who imported Hellenistic myth into the Jesus tradition. The corruption of the tradition, however, raises an interesting problem: If the tradition was so thoroughly corrupt, how could Old Quest scholars recover the historical Jesus? In response to this very question, Reimarus wrote, "It is evident with regard to the old system [i.e., the aim of Jesus to call Israel to renewal], all depends upon whether the evangelists, in their history of Jesus, left unintentionally and through sheer carelessness, a few remaining traces of the reasons which influenced them at first in attributing to their master the object of becoming a worldly deliverer of Israel."¹⁰ In other words, the historical Jesus can be reconstructed from the traces of Jesus tradition that the Evangelists unwittingly included in their gospels. By distinguishing the aims of Jesus from the aims of the disciples,

⁹Hermann Reimarus, *Fragments* (Ed. by Charles Talbert. Trans. Ralph Fraser. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 135.

Reimarus began the process of driving a wedge between the historical Jesus and the Jesus portrayed in the gospels.

Because the traditional portrait of Jesus was believed to be historically inaccurate and rationally untenable, scholars of the Old Quest believed that it was their duty to reform the Christian religion. Unlike the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth-century, however, these scholars sought not to correct the church but to save Christianity from the church. The reformation envisioned would be the result of exposing the Christ of faith as a historical fraud and offering in its place their reconstruction of the historical Jesus. The secularization of Christianity, then, would bring it more in line with Natural Religion. By setting the historical record straight, Old Quest scholars hoped to overthrow the traditional portrait of Jesus and establish the historical Jesus as the proper object of Christian faith. It is probably more accurate to say that they were primarily interested in the message of the historical Jesus rather than the historical Jesus himself.

The "essence of Christianity," for scholars like Adolf von Harnack, was the gospel (good news) of Jesus' teaching.¹¹ For these scholars, the church had replaced the eternal message of Jesus with the myth of an eternal Jesus. Their goal was to remedy this situation by replacing the church's christology with a secularist christology, namely, the historical (secular) Jesus.

The historical motivation of the Old Quest did not go unchallenged, especially the attempt to replace the Christ of faith with the historical Jesus as the proper object of Christian faith. Martin Kähler, in fact, argued that the historical Jesus cannot function as the object of

¹¹Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* (Trans. Thomas Bailey Sanders. New York: Putnam, 1957).

faith: "How can this figure of Jesus--the tentative residue remaining after the work of critical subtraction--which must now, for the first time, be ingeniously invoked from the mist of the past, be the object of faith for all Christians?"¹² From Kähler's perspective, the historical Jesus was nothing more than a theoretical construct based upon the probable results of critical historiography, hardly the proper object of Christian faith. More specifically on the theological (ideological) motive of Old Quest scholars, Albert Schweitzer observed, "The historical investigation of the life of Jesus did not take its rise from a purely historical interest; it turned to the Jesus of history as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma."¹³ The Old Quest, then, was driven not so much by historical interest as by a theological (ideological) agenda.

2. The Jesus Seminar's Commitment to Secularization

The Jesus Seminar appears to be following in the footsteps of the Old Quest in its own pursuit of a secularizing quest. In his critique of the Jesus Seminar, Birger Pearson observes that the Seminar is driven by the ideology of "secularization." Pearson is not suggesting that the quest for the historical Jesus be pursued for theological purposes. Rather, he is warning that atheological purposes are just as disconcerting as theological ones. Pearson writes,

Scholars of religion have rightly come to be suspicious of theologically driven scholarship. We should be equally suspicious of atheologically driven scholarship or *any* ideological driven scholarship, political or otherwise...Of course, one should expect that, in secular academic settings (such as a state university in the U.S.), a non-theological approach to historical evidence, including religious evidence, is standard. In my view, it ought to be the starting point even for theological research. This is *not* what we have in the case of the Jesus Seminar.

¹²Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (Ed. and trans. by Carl Braaten. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964): 103.

¹³Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Trans. W. Montgomery. New York: Macmillan, 1968).

What we have instead, is an approach driven by an ideology of secularization, and a process of coloring the historical evidence to fit a secular ideal. Thus, in robbing Jesus of his Jewishness, the Jesus Seminar has finally robbed him of his *religion*.¹⁴

Pearson here distinguishes three types of quest: a theological quest, a non-theological quest, and an atheological quest. The Jesus Seminar, according to Pearson, is to be identified as an atheological quest, which is equivalent to my category of a secularizing quest.

That the Jesus Seminar is pursuing a secularizing quest can be seen from comments by Seminar Fellows. Paul Hollenbach, for example, responds to a hypothetical question: why pursue the quest for the historical Jesus? "In order to overthrow (not just to avoid or to correct) the 'mistake called Christianity' (Miranda). What is that mistake? It is summed up in the divinization of Jesus as the Son of David, Christ, Son of God, Second Person of the Trinity, etc."¹⁵ In *The Five Gospels*, a number of statements likewise reveal this secularizing tendency: "His [Jesus'] responses [to his opponents] were more secular than legal in character,"¹⁶ "The root metaphor itself in v. 39 [of the story of the homeowner and the burglar] could have come from Jesus but it would have been understood on his lips in a secular sense."¹⁷ "Jesus' use of secular proverbs is one basic reason why many of the Fellows are inclined to regard Jesus as a secular

¹⁴Birger Pearson, "The Gospel According to the Jesus Seminar," *Religion* 25 (1995): 334.

¹⁵Paul Hollenbach, "The Historical Jesus Question in North America Today," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 19 (1989): 19. Hollenbach's reference to Miranda is to Jose Miranda, a Latin American liberationist and author of *Being and the Messiah: The Message of St. John* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1977).

¹⁶Robert Funk, et al, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993): 201.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 342.

sage."¹⁸ In his book, *Honest to Jesus* (1996), Robert Funk argues that the Christian message ought to be secularized. "Since that symbolic world [of early Christians] is crumbling or has crumbled, the times call for a wholly secular account of the Christian faith, not just for the sake of its appeal to the third world but primarily for the sake of those who inhabit the contemporary, scientifically minded Western world."¹⁹

As with the Old Quest, the Jesus Seminar began with the rejection of Chalcedonian christology. "*The aim of the quest is to set Jesus free. Its purpose is to liberate Jesus from the scriptural and creedal and experiential prisons in which we have incarcerated him.*"²⁰ Asserting an antithesis between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, the Seminar likewise blames the disciples and Paul for rewriting history and replacing the historical Jesus with the mythical Christ. The disciples of Jesus, according to the Seminar, simply didn't "get it." Having misunderstood the message of Jesus, upon his death they reverted back to the apocalypticism they had learned from John the Baptist.²¹ And instead of preaching Jesus' message, these first disciples preached Jesus. This leads Funk to distinguish between the religion *of* Jesus and the religion *about* Jesus.²² Not only did the disciples preach about Jesus but so did Paul who

¹⁸Ibid., 287.

¹⁹Robert Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996): 298.

²⁰Ibid., 300.

²¹Funk, et al, *The Five Gospels*, 7.

²²Ibid., 31. Or, as Funk puts it elsewhere, "They turned the Iconoclast into an icon," 11. This, of course, is reminiscent of Bultmann's dictum: "The proclaimer became the proclaimed." Or, more recently, John Dominic Crossan has stated, "The Parabolist became the parable."

furthered the error by incorporating hellenistic myth into the tradition. Again, Paul is identified as the culprit who invented traditional Christianity.

Just as with the Old Quest, the Jesus Seminar is convinced that the early church betrayed the Jesus tradition. The Seminar is equally confident in its ability to recover the historical Jesus from this abyss. In *The Five Gospels*, Funk writes, "The Jesus of the gospels is an imaginative theological construct, into which has been woven traces of that enigmatic sage from Nazareth--traces that cry out for recognition and liberation from the firm grip of those whose faith overpowered their memories."²³ Like the Old Quest, the Jesus Seminar believes that the Evangelists unwittingly left traces of the Jesus tradition in their gospels, traces of which can be discerned with the critical tools of historiography.

Just as one senses antipathy toward the church (both ancient and modern) in the Old Quest, this hostility is equally evident in the Seminar's quest. Funk's recent book, *Honest to Jesus*, is largely a diatribe against traditional Christianity. Funk writes, "As I look around me, I am distressed by those who are enslaved by a Christ imposed on them by a narrow and rigid legacy. There are thousands, perhaps millions, of Americans who are the victims of a mythical Jesus conjured up by modern evangelists to whip their followers into a frenzy of guilt and remorse--and cash contributions."²⁴ Those who continue to espouse the mythical Christ, according to Funk, are naive fundamentalists who have duped the majority of American Christians into accepting the traditional portrait, largely for the purpose of power and financial gain. The battle lines drawn in the Old Quest are largely the same as those for the Seminar's

²³Funk, et al, *The Five Gospels*, 4.

²⁴Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 19.

quest: scholars versus traditionalists. And like the Old Quest, Funk believes that scholars have an obligation to enlighten traditionalists with the "assured results of critical scholarship."²⁵

The Jesus Seminar is also similar to the Old Quest in its belief in the relevance of its historical research. For both, the historian's reconstruction of Jesus is to be normative for the Christian religion, because it is based upon the best of critical scholarship. Christianity, then, should replace the traditional portrait of Jesus with the scholar's reconstruction of the historical Jesus, because it is more credible for the modern age. The Jesus Seminar would also agree with the Old Quest that the proper object of Christian faith is the teachings of Jesus. Some scholars mistakenly believe that the Jesus Seminar, like the Old Quest, seeks to replace the Christ of faith with the historical Jesus. On closer examination, however, it becomes clear that neither the Old Quest nor the Jesus Seminar exalt the person of the historical Jesus; rather, both emphasize the teachings of Jesus as central to the Christian faith. In fact, Funk believes that faith in the historical Jesus is nothing short of idolatry:

Jesus himself is not the proper object of faith. This proposition, I realize, is a radical departure from traditional views. Jesus called on his followers to trust the Father, to believe in God's domain or reign. The proper object of faith inspired by Jesus is to trust what Jesus trusted. For that reason, I am not primarily interested in affirmations about Jesus but in the truths that inspired and informed Jesus. To call for faith in Jesus is to substitute the agent for the reality, the proclaimer for the proclaimed...Jesus himself should not be, must not be, the object of faith. That would be to repeat the idolatry of the first believers.²⁶

So then, for both the Old Quest and the Jesus Seminar the Christ of canon and creed is replaced by the teachings of the historical Jesus as the proper object of Christian faith.

²⁵Funk, et al, *The Five Gospels*, 34.

²⁶Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 305.

An unspoken assumption in a secularizing quest is that the historian can move from the descriptive to the normative with no further argumentation. Although historical truths are accurate descriptions of past people and events, there is nothing inherently normative about them. Luke Johnson rightly warns, "The most destructive effect of the Jesus Seminar and recent Historical Jesus books has been the perpetuation of the notion that history somehow determines faith, and that for faith to be correct, the historical accounts that gave rise to it have to be verifiable."²⁷ Johnson, building on the work of Martin Kähler, offers two reasons why history cannot be the basis of Christian faith: (1) since historical reconstructions are fragile and in need of constant revision, they can never sustain the commitment of faith; and (2) Christian faith is not directed at historical facts about Jesus but a living person, the risen Lord Jesus who is proclaimed in the churches. This second reason raises the issue of the proper object of Christian faith.

Prescribing decisions of faith is hardly appropriate for historical discussion. Yet, this is precisely what occurs in a secularizing quest, namely, the demand that a particular historical reconstruction become the object of Christian faith. M. Eugene Boring rightly condemns Jesus scholars who "call for faith in their reconstruction and theological interpretation of the real Jesus. Whoever makes decisions on these matters is no longer functioning as historian."²⁸ Outside of the Old Quest and the Jesus Seminar, no other Jesus scholar calls for faith in his/her historical reconstruction. In fact, the attitude of many scholars within the Third Quest is captured well by

²⁷Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996): 141.

²⁸M. Eugene Boring, "The 'Third Quest' and the Apostolic Faith," *Interpretation* 50.4 (1996): 350.

John Meier: "the proper object of Christian faith is not and cannot be an idea or scholarly reconstruction, however reliable. The object of Christian faith is a living person, Jesus Christ, who fully entered into a true human existence on earth in the first century A. D., but now lives risen and glorified, forever in the Father's presence."²⁹

Just as the Old Quest sought the reformation of the Christian religion, so also does the Jesus Seminar. Although Funk believes that the traditional portrait of Jesus dominates the church (past and present), he is hopeful that the results of the Seminar will serve as a catalyst to bring about a new reformation. "The Attempts to recover the roots of Jesus of Nazareth have nearly always resulted in some reformation or other. I'm not suggesting we are the next Luther, but our work belongs to that same pattern."³⁰ Since fundamentalism can survive only in an atmosphere of biblical illiteracy, the Seminar is convinced that its scholarship will bring deliverance.³¹ The Jesus Seminar, then, seeks not only to deliver the historical Jesus from the gospels but the American people from the tyranny of the churches which presently proclaim the Christ of faith. Reminiscent of Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Funk concludes his book, *Honest to Jesus*, "These are my twenty-one theses. If I had

²⁹John Meier, "The Historical Jesus: Rethinking Some Concepts," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 22.

³⁰Russell, Shorton, "Cross Fire," *Gentleman's Quarterly* 64.6 (1994): 118. Elsewhere, Funk observes, "A reformation is imminent when a movement reviews and revises the records of how it got started. The renewed quest is the precursor of that revision," in *Honest to Jesus*, 306.

³¹John White, "The Tale of Polebridge Press," *Westar Magazine* 1.3 (1987): 7. In agreement, Funk writes, "Why, if we are so harmless, do the evangelicals rail against us? But *Time* should have pointed out that our efforts are aimed precisely at liberating Americans from simplistic and archaic religious views and replacing them with basic literacy in matters religious," in "TIME Marches On" *The Fourth R* 2.2 (1989): 6.

a church, I would scotch tape them to the door."³²

B. Historical Method: Historical Positivism

1. The Role of Historical Positivism in the Old Quest

One of the historical methods to emerge from the Enlightenment was historical positivism, whose beginning can be traced to Auguste Comte (1798-1857). Comte was especially influenced by seventeenth-century British empiricism as epitomized by Francis Bacon. Like Bacon, Comte believed that all knowledge was ultimately scientific, and that science would improve the quality of human existence. One limitation on science, according to Comte, was that only the phenomena (observable reality) could be known. But if science could not know the essence of reality, Comte reasoned, such essence could not be known. In regard to history, Comte was confident that the historian could objectively discern the inherent laws that govern history such that historical knowledge would be as certain as scientific knowledge.

In his six-volume book, *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-42), Comte attempted to discern social order in history. He concluded that social order was to be found in the progress of human thought (or society) through three distinct and necessary stages: theological, metaphysical, and positive (scientific). In the theological stage, humans explain life in terms of divine power. Religion, according to Comte, evolved from Fetishism to Polytheism to Monotheism. Society, during this stage, was authoritarian and militaristic. The second stage, the metaphysical, was characterized by abstract ideas that were influenced by legal and ecclesiastical authorities. The positive (scientific) stage, according to Comte, was the goal of human history. Comte believed that this stage would lead to a utopia, in which society would be ruled by scientists committed to

³²Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 314.

positive facts and scientific method. Religion, in this stage, would be reduced to universal reason and devoid of reference to God. The purpose of religion would simply be to substantiate social ethics.

Central to historical positivism is the belief that historical "facts" can be discovered with the complete objectivity of the historian and with absolute certainty in the historical results. This led scholars of the Old Quest to confidently assert that their conclusions about the historical Jesus were nothing short of historical fact. This included the assertion that the historical Jesus reconstructed by scholars was the actual earthly ("flesh-and-blood") Jesus who lived in first-century Palestine.

2. The Jesus Seminar's Rhetoric of Historical Positivism

Whereas scholars of the Old Quest naively promised more than they could deliver with historical research, the Jesus Seminar has done so intentionally. The rhetoric of historical positivism permeates the writings of the Seminar. There can be no doubt that the Seminar is following in the footsteps of the Old Quest in its boast of objectively reconstructing the historical Jesus with absolute certainty. Even a small sampling of the Seminar's rhetoric confirms this. Funk, for example, has stated, "The Fellows of the Jesus Seminar are critical scholars. To be a *critical* scholar means to make empirical, factual evidence--evidence open to confirmation by independent, neutral observers--the controlling factor in historical judgments."³³ This leads the Jesus Seminar to equate the historical Jesus with the actual earthly Jesus. Funk writes, "To know the truth about Jesus, the real Jesus, one had to find the Jesus of history."³⁴ The Seminar

³³Funk, et al, *The Five Gospels*, 34.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 2.

distinguishes this earthly Jesus from the "Christ of faith," who was created by the early church.

The distinction between the two figures is the difference between a historical person who lived in a particular time and place and was subject to the limitations of a finite existence, and a figure who has been assigned a mythical role, in which he descends from heaven to rescue humankind and, of course, eventually returns there.³⁵

The historical Jesus, for the Seminar, is none other than the earthly Jesus, and this by "the assured results of critical scholarship."

The Old Quest met its demise largely because scholars failed to recognize the limits of critical historical research. And while scholars of the Third Quest exhibit awareness of such limitations, to various degrees, the Jesus Seminar seems oblivious. Basically, there are three limits to historical research, and a brief survey of these limits will reveal the incredible inadequacy of the Seminar's historical approach. The three limitations of historical research are: limits in method, limits to subject matter, and limits on historian.³⁶ Limits in method include the recognition that history is not the only mode of knowing, and that historical research is valid only when applied to appropriate subject matters. In regards to the former, it must be acknowledged that history as a means of knowing is one epistemology among many, e.g., rationalism, empiricism, intuitionism, phenomenology, etc. Historical knowledge, in other words, does not exhaust all that is counted as knowledge. In its quest for the historical Jesus, however, the Jesus Seminar reduces all knowledge to historical knowledge. It would appear that all that can be

³⁵Ibid., 7.

³⁶Luke Timothy Johnson has developed further the criticisms of Martin Kähler and Albert Schweitzer in regard to the defective historical methodology of the Old Quest. Johnson has observed these same defects in recent Jesus Research, especially that of the Jesus Seminar. See Johnson's *The Real Jesus* .

known is known via historical research. Yet, much of what we count as knowledge is ahistorical but true, "things like alienation and forgiveness, compassion and despair, meaning and value, love and hope."³⁷ The Jesus Seminar, then, has created a false dichotomy: either historical knowledge (true) or non-historical knowledge (false).

A second limitation to historical research is the limit to subject matter. In their research, historians must rely upon literary sources and physical evidence. Historians understand that sources are few and that these sources are neither objective nor exhaustive. Extant documents have their origin in an author who wrote from his/her limited and biased perspective. Not only are such writings subjective, but they are fragmentary, i.e., selective in what they preserve. Because of this, the historian must make value judgments about the relative worth of the sources, and beyond this, fill in the historical "gaps" left by the incomplete records.

The third, and final, limitation on historical research is the limits on the historian. The difficulty of historical reconstruction, according to Luke Johnson, lies not only in the subjectivity and self-interest of the ancient sources but also in the subjectivity and self-interest of the historian.³⁸ Historian Arthur Marwick accurately describes this process:

...whether they are aware of it or not, historians pick out, from the opening into the past offered them by the sources, what they find interesting, important, or *significant*. Historians impose order, possibly pattern, define relationships and interactions, they decide what to put in and what to leave out; even if aiming at no more than coherent narrative, they are still contributing form or shape to that narrative.³⁹

³⁷Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 82.

³⁸Ibid., 82-84.

³⁹Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (3rd edition. Chicago: Lyceum Books, 1989): 8.

Just as historical events and people are limited by socio-historical constraints (ala Anthony Harvey),⁴⁰ so are historians. These constraints can be seen in the historian's social structures, personal biases, and theological/ideological commitments. Each historian, then, approaches the research from his/her unique perspective. This includes presuppositions that may influence value judgments and interpretations. Far from being objective and neutral, the historian is an active participant in historical research.

The subjectivity of historical research can be seen in the framing of questions, development of categories, the valuing of sources, the interpretation of data, and the process of generalizing. Often times historians must rely upon conjecture and speculation to fill in the "gaps" left by their sources. Historians also interpret ancient texts, and as Bultmann has observed there is no interpretation without presupposition. In addition, history is a reconstructive effort which "seeks to take the often sparse and accidental evidence of past human events and connect them in some meaningful pattern."⁴¹ This, of course, means that the results of historical research are far from certain. Most historians, in fact, acknowledge that their historical reconstructions are tentative theories based upon probability and open to testing by fellow historians.

In the Third Quest for the historical Jesus, there is generally the awareness that the scholar's reconstruction is far from absolute. Unfortunately, this same humility does not characterize the Jesus Seminar's claims about their historical Jesus. In addition to the boasts of

⁴⁰Anthony Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (London: SCM Press, 1982).

⁴¹Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 83.

objectivity and certainty, the Jesus Seminar claims to portray the "real" Jesus in their historical reconstruction. By this, of course, they mean the actual earthly Jesus who lived and breathed in first-century Palestine. Most scholars of the Third Quest recognize the difference between the historical Jesus and the earthly Jesus. John Meier is probably the clearest on this distinction. Meier writes, "this 'historical Jesus' will always remain a scientific construct, a theoretical abstraction that does not and cannot coincide with the full reality of Jesus of Nazareth as he actually lived and worked in Palestine during the 1st century of our era."⁴² Another way to put it is: just as the Christ of faith is the church's interpretation of the earthly Jesus, the historical Jesus is the historian's interpretation of the earthly Jesus. To confuse the historical Jesus with the earthly Jesus, according to Meier, is to misunderstand the nature of historical research. What Meier says about Jesus research, Luke Johnson applies to all historical research. Johnson argues that it is beyond the scope of critical historiography to reproduce a "real" person or to recapture a "real" event. "The 'real' event in all its complex particularity happened only once and cannot be recovered by any means."⁴³

In its literature, the Jesus Seminar uses the rhetoric of historical positivism. As seen from the discussion above, the Jesus Seminar, like the Old Quest is promising more than it can deliver. In his assessment of the Jesus Seminar, N. T. Wright correctly observes,

⁴²John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (volume 1. New York: Doubleday, 1991): 1.

⁴³Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 85.

The puzzle about this is that it buys into exactly the sort of positivism that is now routinely abandoned by the great majority of scholars working in the fields of history and texts--including by several members of the Jesus Seminar themselves. The idea that by historical investigation one might arrive at a position of unbiased objective certainty, of absolute unconditioned knowledge, about anything, has been shot to pieces by critiques from a variety of points of view. All knowledge is conditioned by the context and agenda of the knower; all reconstructions are somebody's reconstructions, and each 'somebody' sees the world through their own eyes and not their neighbor's.⁴⁴

Given the fact that historical research requires subjectivity and is based upon probability, one would expect a degree of humility about the historical results. "The best practitioners of critical historiography, therefore, are careful to make clear the character of their craft as a limited mode of knowing, depending on the frailties of the records of memory and the proclivities of self-interest."⁴⁵ The rhetoric of historical positivism found in the Jesus Seminar is a far cry from this kind of reserved scholarship.

C. Historical Results: Constructive History

1. The Old Quest Constructed a Self-Portrait

One of the ironies of the Old Quest is that even though scholars naively boasted of objectivity and certainty, they ultimately created Jesus in their own image. The historical Jesus portrayed in the Old Quest was a non-eschatological teacher of kingdom ethics. By focusing on the sayings of Jesus, the scholars of the Old Quest assumed that the primary characteristic of Jesus was that of teaching. Beyond this, these scholars concentrated on the ethical teachings of Jesus, interpreting them as a social ethic for the kingdom of God. That ethic varied among Old

⁴⁴N. T. Wright, "Five Gospels but No Gospel," in *Crisis in Christology: Essays in Quest of Resolution*, ed. William Farmer. (Livonia, Michigan: Dove Booksellers, 1995): 125.

⁴⁵Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 85.

Quest scholars, but its "essence" was captured by Adolf von Harnack: "Firstly, the kingdom of God and its coming. Secondly, God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul. Thirdly, the higher righteousness and the commandment of love."⁴⁶ For Old Quest scholars, the kingdom of God was a present, "this-worldly" kingdom, a heaven (utopia) on earth brought about by the transformation of society through Jesus' ethic of love.

Interestingly, the social ethic discovered in the historical Jesus was the same as that which prevailed among the intellegensia (intellectual elite). Just as secularists of the Old Quest believed in the progress of humankind culminating in an earthly utopia, so they discovered a Jesus who was a secularist with the same interest. In their efforts to modernize Jesus, scholars of the Old Quest created Jesus in their own image. So then, rather than provide the promised results of historical positivism, these scholars constructed history to meet the needs of modern (secular) society. Martin Kähler attributed the results of the Old Quest more to the historian's creativity than to critical scholarship: "It is plainly evident that the imagination which thus orders and shapes the Gospel materials is being guided by still another force, namely, by a preconceived view of religion and ethical matters."⁴⁷ In contrast to the Old Quest, both Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer believed that the Jesus tradition pointed to Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet who predicted not the betterment of the world, but its impending doom. Regarding the Jesus of the Old Quest, Schweitzer wrote that he was "a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in historical garb."⁴⁸

⁴⁶Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* 51.

⁴⁷Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus*, 55.

⁴⁸Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 398.

2. The Jesus Seminar Constructs a Self-Portrait

What the Old Quest did in ignorance the Jesus Seminar has done intentionally. Although the Seminar uses the rhetoric of historical positivism, it has as one of its goals the creation of a new fiction of Jesus, a fiction that has "operational effectiveness" for modern men and women.⁴⁹

It seems contradictory to promise "the assured results of critical scholarship," while at the same time writing constructive history. Luke Johnson has noticed this same inconsistency:

On the one side, its members seek credibility by invoking the language of critical historiography: they claim to be scientific, to assess the data without bias, to be free from the constraints of ecclesiastical authority. They say they are engaging in value-free research, letting the chips fall where they may...On the other side, the Seminar also claims the privilege of constructive history to provide an alternate version of Jesus that the world (and above all the church) is suppose to take seriously.⁵⁰

What the Jesus Seminar has done is what consumer advocates call "bait and switch." Having drawn readers with the claims of neutrality and certainty, the Seminar offers instead *its* interpretation of the evidence and *its* reconstruction of Jesus.

What Johnson calls constructive history, Craig Evans calls revisionist history. Evans writes,

Revisionism, which is what in essence we are talking about, is a problem that plagues most disciplines concerned with history. Gender issues, ethnic issues, social and economic issues currently drive much of contemporary scholarship. In effect, we want to find our cause championed by the heroes of the past. For Christians this often means Jesus has to be seen advocating a particular Christian agenda. Consequently, it is often not a quest for the historical Jesus as it is a quest for justification of our views.⁵¹

⁴⁹Robert Funk, "The Issue of Jesus," *Forum* 1.1 (1985): 7-12.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 86.

⁵¹Craig Evans, "The Need for the 'Historical Jesus': A Response to Jacob Neusner's Review of Crossan and Meier," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 4 (1994): 131.

The Jesus Seminar's secularizing quest has basically reconstructed a Jesus who substantiates not so much their theology but their ideology. But does the Jesus Seminar really follow in the footsteps of the Old Quest in portraying the historical Jesus as a modern-day secularist?

Although the Jesus Seminar has only recently entered Phase Three, the reconstruction of the historical Jesus, Funk has offered some preliminary conclusions. The portrait of the historical Jesus emerging from the efforts of the Jesus Seminar is a "social gadfly" or "comic savant," who associated with the dregs of society, taught counter-cultural sayings, and practiced subversive behavior.⁵² This Jesus was not an apocalyptic prophet but a popular teacher who proclaimed the present reality of the kingdom of God, an egalitarian kingdom in which people would experience the reversal of roles and full reciprocity.⁵³ The closest analogy in the ancient world, according to Funk, is the wandering cynic sage.⁵⁴ The historical Jesus constructed by the Jesus Seminar is a non-eschatological teacher of kingdom ethics. Like the Old Quest, the Seminar has focused on the sayings of Jesus revealing their conviction that Jesus was primarily a teacher. The Jesus Seminar is also similar in its understanding of the kingdom of God as a present ("this-worldly") reality. Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet, according to Funk, has died a "scholarly death."⁵⁵

The Old Quest and the Jesus Seminar differ only on the social ethic that characterizes the

⁵²Robert Funk, "Jesus the Social Gadfly," *The Fourth R* 2.5 (1989): 1, 9-10.

⁵³Robert Funk, "The Jesus That Was," *The Fourth R* 5.6 (1992): 1-6.

⁵⁴Funk, "Jesus the Social Gadfly," 9.

⁵⁵Robert Funk, "The Emerging Jesus," *The Fourth R* 2.6 (1989): 1, 11-15.

kingdom of God. Whereas in the Old Quest Jesus proclaimed a kingdom ethic of love, the Jesus of the Jesus Seminar teaches about an egalitarian kingdom. Although the kingdom of God is believed to be a present reality in both the Old Quest and the Jesus Seminar, the Seminar understands the kingdom in purely symbolic terms. Through his proclamation of the kingdom, according to the Seminar, Jesus offered an alternate life-world, one that stood in opposition to the habituated life-world. Jesus' hearers only need to give up what they perceive to be real and participate in this fantasy called the kingdom. The image here is of a Don Quixote who wanders about the countryside inviting people to share in his imaginary world. But unlike a Don Quixote, Funk believes that Jesus actually caught a glimpse of another reality: "In his authentic parables and aphorisms, Jesus provides a glimpse into another reality, one that lies beyond the present conceptual horizons. His words and deeds open onto that reality."⁵⁶

The Jesus portrayed by the Jesus Seminar appears to be a secularist, who is a politically correct cultural critic. Ben Witherington offers this insight: Perhaps they wish to see themselves as sages offering counterculture wisdom.⁵⁷ This is incredibly ironic, given the Seminar warning: "Beware of finding a Jesus entirely congenial to you."⁵⁸ Yet it is difficult to imagine what is not congenial to the Jesus Seminar about an anti-establishment Jesus who sides with the marginalized of society. There can be no doubt that the egalitarian kingdom ethic taught by the Jesus of the Jesus Seminar would have challenged first century Jews, and perhaps even modern-

⁵⁶Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 19.

⁵⁷Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1995): 57.

⁵⁸Funk, et al, *The Five Gospels*, 5.

day traditionalists. The question is whether or not this Jesus challenges or confirms the ideological commitment of the Jesus Seminar. The latter appears to be the case.

That the Jesus reconstructed by the Jesus Seminar resembles Seminar Fellows has not gone unnoticed. Robert Yarbrough offers this insightful observation: "It is hardly coincidental that in the midst of mainline academia's this-worldly egalitarian liberationist theologies we suddenly learn that Jesus was a this-worldly egalitarian liberationist."⁵⁹ Yarbrough's insight has been confirmed by a number of other observers, including Charles Talbert, who writes, "The Jesus of Crossan and the Jesus Seminar is indeed a mirror image of the left wing civil religion that dominates North American universities and theological schools at this point in time...Their Jewish Cynic is a politically correct Jesus, appropriate for their own time and places."⁶⁰ Not only is the Seminar's Jesus politically correct, but his demeanor resembles that of a university professor, so observes David Timmer: "The Seminar's Jesus certainly fits the bill: he is a skeptical and ironic sage with a tolerant and inclusive disposition and a deep suspicion of authority. He has everything he needs, except a corduroy jacket and a well-worn pair of hiking boots, to blend into the faculty lounge of any North American university. And, of course, he has the added virtue of enraging the clerics."⁶¹

Like scholars of the Old Quest, the Jesus Seminar has promised a Jesus who is relevant to

⁵⁹Robert Yarbrough, "The Gospel According to the Jesus Seminar," *Presbyterion* 20.1 (1994): 16.

⁶⁰Charles Talbert, "Political Correctness Invades Jesus Research," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 21.3 (1994): 251-252.

⁶¹David Timmer, Review of *The Five Gospels*, by Robert Funk (et al), In *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* 9 (Dec. 1994): 20.

our times. And yet, as with the Old Quest, the Jesus Seminar has reconstructed a Jesus who is a mirror-image of themselves. It seems that the Jesus Seminar, like the Old Quest, perceives themselves as relevant to our times. And in both cases, the relevancy is found in the ideology of secularism. Birger Pearson rightly concludes,

A group of secularized theologians and secular academics went seeking a secular Jesus, and they found him! They think they found him, but, in fact, they created him. Jesus the 'party animal' whose zany wit and caustic humor would enliven an otherwise dull cocktail party--this is the product of the Jesus Seminar's six years' research. In a sense, the Jesus Seminar, with its ideology of secularization, represents a 'shadow image' of the old 'New Quest'--and its ultimate bankruptcy.⁶²

By all indications the Jesus Seminar has indeed constructed a portrait of the historical Jesus that is all too congenial to its own ideological commitment, namely, secularism.

This raises an interesting question: Given the Jesus Seminar's commitment to marketing their portrait of the historical Jesus, who's buying it? Surely not the majority of American Christians whom, Funk says, continue to affirm the Christ of faith. The Seminar has also failed to make any headway in current Jesus research. The responses of fellow Jesus scholars have varied from apathy and embarrassment to chastisement and ridicule. The favorable response that the Jesus Seminar so desires has been found only among like-minded secularists. This can be seen in the fertile ground found by the Seminar among Unitarian-Universalist churches. In a recent article for *The Fourth R*, Unitarian-Universalist Will Moredock observed, "The historical Jesus [constructed by the Jesus Seminar] has the potential to unite Unitarians who come to the fold from both scientific humanist and Christian traditions. On the one hand, this is a Jesus whose birth and death conform to the laws of nature. On the other hand, this is a Jesus whose

⁶²Pearson, "The Gospel According to the Jesus Seminar," 334.

life challenged the laws and customs of Roman-occupied Palestine."⁶³ After all the rhetoric, it appears that the Jesus Seminar is merely "preaching to the choir" of American secularists.

Conclusion

The Jesus Seminar is an anomaly in the Third Quest, and even though it has roots in the New Quest it is distinct from that quest. The closest analogy to the Jesus Seminar's quest for the historical Jesus is the Old Quest. As shown above, these two quests have numerous points of contact, such as, historical motivation, historical method, and historical result. Both are best characterized as secularizing quests, which attempt to reconstruct a historical Jesus that is relevant to the modern (secular) world. There is a danger, however, in attempts to modernize Jesus, namely, the danger of reconstructing a portrait of Jesus that is nothing more than a self-portrait. This is precisely what scholars of the Old Quest did, and it appears to be what the Jesus Seminar is now doing. Yet, while the former did so naively, the latter does so intentionally. In both cases, the historiography is defective. Just as this was observed in the Old Quest, even now scholars are beginning to observe this same pattern in the work of the Jesus Seminar. Following in the footsteps of the Old Quest, the Jesus Seminar has failed to overcome the criticisms that were leveled against the Old Quest. Indeed, the Seminar commits the same errors in historiography that led to the demise of the Old Quest.

⁶³Will Moredock, "Unitarian Universalists and the Jesus Seminar," *The Fourth R* 11.1 (1998): 12.