

# Putting the Historical Jesus in His Place

## Part 1

### *A New Thought Christian Perspective*

“If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!”  
—traditional Zen saying

## Paul Alan Laughlin

Now that the latest episode in the ongoing quest for the historical Jesus is pretty much over and the sayings and doings of the foundational figure of the Christian faith have been identified more or less to the satisfaction of the scholars and supporters of the Jesus Seminar, there remains the question of what to do with the Reconstructed One now that he has been, as it were, resurrected from the cold sepulcher of tradition and had fresh air breathed into his ancient nostrils. As Westar Institute takes up the task of rethinking the Christian faith in light of this newly recovered historical Jesus, the temptation is almost irresistible to install him as the founder of the faith and to establish his teachings as its foundation, and thus to make Christianity at last the religion *of* Jesus rather than *about* Jesus. Indeed, a Christianity based on the teachings of the historical Jesus instead of the divine Christ of ecclesiastical tradition has been something of an alluring fantasy in Christian liberalism from its very outset. I have shared it for nearly forty years. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest—if it is not too late—that we not rush headlong in our pursuit of this fantasy, but instead pause, take a deep breath, and reflect a bit.

Much of the ground-breaking and eye-opening work of the Jesus Seminar was conducted over against traditional, mainstream Christianity and its emphasis on Jesus as the Christ: a savior-figure whose atoning death has the power to redeem sinners from the wrath and hellacious, eternal punishment of a vengeful God. This sort of Christianity and its theology have provided the Seminar's Fellows and Associates a useful foil as well as a motivating force. But to recast Jesus and the faith derived from him simply or even primarily *vis-à-vis* traditional Christianity is to limit the range of possibilities. For one thing, the sin-redemption model of mainstream Western Christianity

is not and has never been the only kind of Christianity. There have always been minority reports—individuals, movements, sects, and styles—offering more positive interpretations of human nature, and therefore of Jesus and his role as the Christ. Non-Christian frameworks, both religious and philosophical, have also cast their own unique lights on the man and his message.

To some extent, I began trying to “put Jesus in his place” in my earlier *Fourth R* article, “The Once and Future Christ of Faith” (March–April, 2005). There I suggested that the historical Jesus was but one of four useful Jesus-Christ images, each of which would appeal primarily to one of four corresponding spiritual orientations. In this essay and one to follow it, I propose a different approach to reconceiving the proper place of the historical Jesus in a revamped Christian faith, by bringing to bear two non-traditional conceptual frameworks, one Christian and one secular. The first is a little-known type of American-made religion called New Thought, which will be the subject of this essay. In a subsequent article, I shall look at both the historical Jesus and the work of the Jesus Seminar in the light of a new theory of the evolution and nature of human consciousness called Spiral Dynamics. Neither piece will argue for the inherent validity or value of the conceptual framework being employed, though it is reasonable to infer that I find both compelling. My reason for presenting them here, however, is simply their usefulness in nudging us to look at Jesus and his proper place in Christianity from unfamiliar angles and in new ways.

### **Jesus in a New Thought Christian Perspective**

If the term “New Thought” is unfamiliar to members of the Westar community or other advocates of religious literacy, that is hardly cause for embarrassment. The move-

ment itself and the various organizations that comprise it have effectively though unintentionally maintained a very low profile in their first century or so.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, among the movements that sprang up on the nineteenth-century American religious landscape—most notably Shakerism, Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, Mormonism, Christian Science, Theosophy, and Jehovah's Witnesses—New Thought is the least widely recognized and survives in relatively small numbers and virtual obscurity.

Though rooted historically in Christian Science, New Thought split away quite early and dramatically. Its founder, Emma Curtis Hopkins, had been a student of the founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy, but Hopkins broke with her mentor over theoretical and personal differences. To put it bluntly, they disagreed disagreeably. Hopkins then began to teach her own brand of metaphysical religion, which spawned so many charismatic spiritual leaders and organizational founders that she became known as "The Teacher of Teachers." Among her students were Malinda Cramer, founder (or perhaps co-founder) of Divine Science; Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, co-founders of Unity; and Ernest Holmes, the founder of Religious Science (which is also known as Science of Mind).<sup>2</sup> These three are the oldest and most enduring New Thought branches, and most followers of New Thought identify with one or another of them or their offshoots.<sup>3</sup>

The main tenets of New Thought are decidedly different from those of traditional Christianity. God is seen as an immanent (that is, *indwelling*) and universal Essence, Presence, Power, Principle, or Mind that is innate, inherent, and indelible not just in but as human nature. Christ (independently of the man Jesus) is simply a formal name for that selfsame divine Essence of or Presence within every human being, and as such is the

source of truth, health and healing, peace, joy, love, and prosperity. Jesus is seen as one (but not the only one) who either historically manifested or symbolically represents this Christ-ness. Evil, Satan, and sin are regarded as lacking either basis in fact or substantial reality, the three being merely products of faulty thinking.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the idea of an atoning death and the display of the cross, its symbolic representation, are repudiated. Spiritual practice focuses on employing silent meditation, centering (that is, introvertive) prayer, positive thinking, and personal affirmations to gain access to the spiritual essence and its benefits.<sup>5</sup> The spiritual life is viewed as a journey toward one's Higher Good, which is to say a deeper realization of one's inherent divinity; and most New Thought advocates accept (usually unofficially) reincarnation as a part of this picture. Finally, the Bible is best interpreted "metaphysically," which is to say metaphorically, allegorically, or figuratively; and it is often complemented by a wide range of spiritual literature, including writings of leading New Thought lights and scriptures from world religions other than Christianity. Overall, the divergence from mainstream Western Christianity could hardly be greater.

### New Thought in an Eastern and Westar Light

The reader who has detected an Eastern flavor in these New Thought teachings has been paying attention. Most if not all of the founders of New Thought—those mentioned above and some other notable early lights—were either attracted to or influenced by Eastern religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism. That is why their writings exhibit such South, East, and Southeast Asian themes as an immanent, non-personified Ultimate, the essential sacredness of human nature, ignorance (rather than sin) as the human predicament, the spiritual journey as inward and ongoing, an introverted-autonomous spirituality, the founder as a spiritual master or guru whose lofty status is attainable, and scripture as figurative or metaphorical.

All of this suggests a mystical bent; and indeed, on at least one occasion, Bishop John Shelby Spong described Unity appreciatively as "popular mysticism." That is true, however, only of Unity at its inception and in its purest expressions today. The usual situation is quite different. For

4. Perhaps the most important theoretical distinction between New Thought and Christian Science is that the latter denied the substantial reality not only of evil and its associates, but of the material world itself. It is for that reason that while both Christian Science and New Thought emphasize the spiritual healing power of the mind, New Thought has not gone so far as to reject the services of medical professionals in favor of purely spiritual practitioners.

5. It is for this reason that philosopher-psychologist William James treated it appreciatively in his classic *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) as "the religion of healthy-mindedness."

1. An anecdote might be useful to illustrate New thought's relative obscurity: I had studied and taught American Religious History for many years before New Thought was brought to my notice when a new acquaintance suggested that I attend a local church representing that tradition. I was chagrined at my ignorance of this movement until I informally surveyed a fair sampling of fellow college professors of religion and the major textbooks on American religion. Only one of my peers had even heard of New Thought, and only one out of a dozen books mentioned it, and only in passing at that.

2. The term "Science" throughout this paragraph has nothing to do with modern science in general or any of the experimental sciences, but instead refers to esoteric spiritual knowledge or wisdom.

3. The two principal organizational expressions in the Divine Science lineage are the *Divine Science Federation International* and *United Divine Science Ministries, International*. Under the Unity umbrella are the Unity School of Practical Christianity (generally just known as Unity), the Unity-Progressive Council, and the World Federation of Practical Christianity. Religious Science has three primary organizations: the *United Church of Religious Science*, *Religious Science International*, and *Global Religious Science Ministries*. Independent of these are the Japanese-based Seicho-no-Ie (Truth of Life) and the Universal Foundation for Better Living, whose President is Westar Associate, Board member, and long-time supporter, the Rev. Dr. Mary Tumpkin.

over a decade I have considered myself a New Thought Christian and still belong to its credentialed ministry, but I am sad to say that the healthy spiritual introspection and introversion of mysticism has often failed in practice. Unfortunately, it too easily degenerates into a thinly veiled egotism and produces a superficial, sentimental, self-serving, and self-aggrandizing jingoism and happy-babble that can aptly be termed "Hallmark holiness." Further, New Thought organizations have tended to eschew traditional academic education and theology, leaving their key concepts and principles intellectually underdeveloped. When I speak of New Thought or New Thought Christianity, therefore, I am referring to the movement in its oldest, purest, and most profound manifestations, to those relatively few organizations and congregations that still maintain that focus, and to individuals (like our little coterie of Westar New Thinkers) who like to center their spirits, heed their hearts, emulate their exemplar, and exercise their minds.

Of the cardinal beliefs of New Thought Christianity, those most relevant to the work of the Jesus Seminar naturally concern Jesus and the Bible. But these two topics are important only for those New Thought adherents who still regard themselves as Christians, for, of the three venerable branches of New Thought noted above, only Unity (the largest) and its derivatives have remained intentionally and self-consciously Christian. To be sure, many followers of Divine Science and Religious Science would so identify themselves, but officially, at least, their organizations do not. For New Thought *Christians*, then, Jesus is typically regarded as a prototype or archetype of the fully self-realized human being and, as such, an exemplar or guide for everyone's spiritual path toward self-realization. For obvious reasons, the favorites among his recorded sayings are "The Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21) and the one regarding that mustard-seed, mountain-moving brand of faith (Matthew 17:20 and Luke 17:6), which we might call today the power of positive thinking. For better or for worse, the radical social teachings of Jesus are mostly ignored in favor of those seen as having a more individualized, mystical message. Even the Sermon on the Mount is typically read as a spiritual treatise to be internalized rather than a social agenda to be actualized. Indeed, the Bible as a whole is seen as a spiritual guide, especially those portions that lend themselves to metaphorical interpretation: the Genesis-Exodus stories, the Psalms, the gospels (especially John), and some of the epistles. In the last category, one of the favorites is the pseudo-Pauline "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

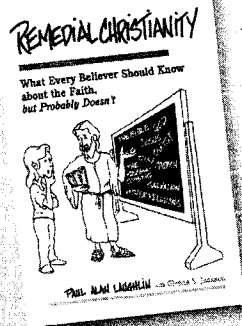
*Jesus is typically regarded as a prototype or archetype of the fully self-realized human being and, as such, an exemplar or guide for everyone's spiritual path toward self-realization.*

## The Matter of Autonomy and Authority

Whether or not the tenets of either New Thought generally or New Thought Christianity in particular would find a wide appeal among Westar members (as they do to at least a minority of us), they do provide a different angle from which to view the findings of the Jesus Seminar. We are all well aware that from the perspective of traditional Christianity the Seminar was from the very beginning doing the work of the Devil, for its very methodology undermined the authority of the gospels and, by implication, the entire Bible. In their own way, however, the founders of New Thought had done that over a century earlier with their "metaphysical" approach to biblical interpretation. Consider also that traditionalist Christians attacked the Seminar for detracting from the importance of Jesus in the grand scheme of things. Here again, New Thought had already done that: even New Thought *Christians* had relativized him by taking him off the redemptive cross and making him, in effect, "merely" a guru and exemplar to be followed—and one among many, at that. It is no wonder, then, that New Thought organizations like Unity are often

*Continued on page 17*

## Paul Alan Laughlin



*Remedial Christianity* places Christianity among the world's major religions and contrasts and compares its doctrine and practice with those of other great religions.

279 pages, paperback, \$20.00  
ISBN 0-944344-77-1

*Getting Oriented* leads readers on an adventurous trek to discover and unlock the treasures of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism.

295 pages, paperback, \$20.00  
ISBN 0-944344-54-2



Continued on page 17



denounced as “cults” by mainstream Christians, especially those with evangelical and fundamentalist leanings.

That charge aside, the simple fact is that the New Thought vision of Jesus is even more radical than that of the Jesus Seminar and presents the latter with an interesting challenge. Think about it: had the Jesus Seminar found no authentic sayings of Jesus in any of the gospels, New Thought Christians would have seen no cause for alarm or reason to despair. After all, both Jesus and the Bible are, to use a familiar Zen image, merely “fingers pointing to the moon.” And that moon is the inner spiritual nature or true self within every individual, which effectively renders everyone and everything else—including Jesus and the Bible—as mere adjuncts of the spiritual life. In this regard, New Thought might well revise the Zen aphorism cited at the beginning of this article, and advise the spiritual seeker thus: “If you meet Jesus on your path, kill him!” *In fact, from a New Thought perspective, Christian or otherwise, the scholars of the Jesus Seminar would have done everyone a favor if they had declared themselves utterly unable to recover an historical Jesus.* An announcement of such a “failure” would have helped to remove yet another external distraction (and no doubt the most insidious) from the inward-focus of mysticism, and it would be none other than Jesus. All New Thought Christians need is the innate, inherent, and indelible Christ within. Everything else is dispensable.

If nothing else, then, a New Thought perspective on such matters serves to warn Westar members and admirers against the potential danger of a new *heteronomy*, that is, deference to or dependence upon external authorities—in this case, in religious or spiritual matters. In the Preface of his classic *Taking Leave of God*, Don Cupitt wisely argues that the only viable (and moral) religion henceforth must be just the opposite: autonomous, which is to say, with authority located in the individual, who embraces beliefs and practices not because they have been prescribed by some external source (heteronomously), but because they are “intrinsically valuable.” I believe that Cupitt is absolutely right in this regard. The old heteronomy of mainstream Western Christianity rested on the authority of the Bible and Jesus-as-the-Christ, the two ultimate expressions of God’s power, authority, and will—all of which are external to the believer. But in the wake of the radical findings of the Jesus Seminar, a new, and no less deleterious heteronomy threatens, one that accedes to the historical Jesus (and his authentic sayings) as authoritative, the adoption of his radical social and political agenda, and the necessity of performing various deeds *because he said so*. Under this new heteronomy, such directives would be valid because

*It really doesn't matter  
whether a saying originated  
in the mind of the  
historical Jesus or in the  
religious imaginations of  
the evangelists.*

they were found in ancient texts rather than because their worthiness was determined by our own deep sense of the way the world is and should be—which is to say, by our own spirituality, conscience, or intellect.

From the standpoint of a thoroughgoing autonomy, it really doesn’t matter whether a saying originated in the mind of the historical Jesus or in the religious imaginations of the evangelists and the words that they put on the lips of their narrative hero of that same name. What does matter is whether it resonates with the mind, heart, and spirit of the reader. In other words, autonomy demands that ideas and utterances be inherently compelling regardless of the source. Put it yet another way: Who is to say that the historical Jesus is necessarily more authoritative and compelling than, say, the historical Luke or the historical John (whatever their names really were)? Under the principle of autonomy, authority derives its sanction from the individual, and might be better characterized as *authenticity*. In fact, a useful rule of thumb not only in biblical interpretation, but in spiritual and theological pursuits as a whole is this: “Authenticity (autonomy) always trumps authority (heteronomy).”

## Conclusion

New Thought undeniably presents an alternative perspective to the one that prevails in Westar’s scholarship and colors its effort to reconstruct the Christian faith. First, New Thought maintains that pure rationalism is not the only legitimate way to read the Bible; that a freer, more metaphorical or figurative reading might also be a valid approach in the nurturing of a spiritual life. In this regard, New Thought revives the spirit of Origen, the great third-century Egyptian Christian theologian who believed scripture to be richly layered in meaning and therefore amenable to various types of interpretation, including what he termed “spiritual.” Second, New Thought challenges the assumption that the historical Jesus should be the foundation of the faith, asserting instead that whether we focus on Jesus, or Christ, or Jesus as the Christ, the chosen image must be subservient to the inherent spirituality (or innate divinity) of the individual person. Third, New Thought represents a radical form of spiritual autonomy, one that relativizes all external authorities, including the Bible, the historical Jesus, and anyone who would presume to speak for them.

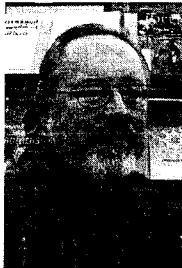
The kind of serious deconstructive and reconstructive biblical and theological work that Westar has undertaken ought not, and finally cannot, be done in a vacuum. It must unfold within the context of a constant dialogue between competing religious and spiritual views. Some,

like the tenets of traditional, mainstream Christianity, will appear more conservative and, ironically, more comfortable, because they are so familiar. Indeed, most of us were reared in and acculturated into them, accepted them as the norm in our formative years, and may even still harbor some traces of nostalgia for them. Other viewpoints, such as that of New Thought (and the Eastern perspective that it represents), will seem quite radical and discomfiting, if only because they are unfamiliar, strange, or downright exotic; and they may well prove utterly unacceptable for a variety of reasons. Whatever one finally thinks about New Thought as a religious or spiritual option, therefore, one must come to terms with the radically autonomous way in which it puts the historical Jesus in his place. For by first diminishing and finally denying both his importance in the grand scheme of things and the authority of the scriptures that attest him, New Thought challenges contemporary would-be reformers of Christianity to rethink and perhaps re-evaluate the role, the status, and even the importance of its foundational figure and documents. **4R**

## Bibliography

- Anderson, C. Alan and Deborah G. Whitehouse. *New Thought: A Practical American Spirituality*. New York: Crossroad, 1995.
- Armor, Reginald C., et al. *That Was Ernest: The Story of Ernest Holmes and the Religious Science Movement*. Marina del Rey, CA: DeVorss Publications, 1999.

- Braden, Charles. *Spirits in Rebellion: The Rise and Development of New Thought*. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963.
- Cupitt, Don. *Taking Leave of God*. New York: Crossroad, 1981.
- Dresser, Horatio. *A History of the New Thought Movement*. New York: T. Y. Crowell Company, 1919.
- Freeman, James Dillett. *The Story of Unity*, 4th ed. Unity Village, MO: Unity Books, 2000.
- Harley, Gail M. *Emma Curtis Hopkins: Forgotten Founder of New Thought*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002.
- James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* [1902]. New York: Triumph Books, 1991.
- Laughlin, Paul Alan, with Glenna M. Jackson. *Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know about the Faith, but Probably Doesn't*. Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2000.
- Satter, Beryl. *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999.



**Paul Alan Laughlin** is Professor in the Department of Religion and Philosophy, Otterbein College, Westerville, Ohio. He is the author of *Getting Oriented: What Every Christian Should Know about Eastern Religions, but Probably Doesn't* (2005) and *Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know about the Faith, but Probably Doesn't* (2000).

### February 10-11

#### Bellevue, Washington

*Jesus in the 1st and 21st Centuries*

Bernard Brandon Scott & Daryl D. Schmidt

#### Sarasota, Florida

*Sex, Death & Evolution*

Jack Hill & Jarmo Tarkki

### February 17-18

#### Washington, DC

*Jesus, Teller of Parables*

Bernard Brandon Scott & Edward F. Beutner

### March 17-18

#### Sahuarita, Arizona

*Jesus from Cradle to Grave*

Robert J. Miller & Arthur J. Dewey

#### Carmel Valley, California

*Eating, Drinking & Mourning in Jesus' Day*

Hal Taussig & Kathleen E. Corley

#### Longboat Key, Florida

*Jesus in the 1st and 21st Centuries*

Thomas Sheehan & Charles W. Hedrick

# WESTAR INSTITUTE

## Jesus Seminar



## on the Road

# Spring 2006

### March 24-25

#### Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

*Jesus, Teller of Parables*

Lane C. McGaughey & Edward F. Beutner

#### Pasadena, California

*Sex, Death & Evolution*

Jack Hill & Thomas Sheehan

#### Wilmington, Delaware

*Sex, Ethics & Evolution*

Joe Bessler-Northcutt & Jarmo Tarkki

### April 7-8

#### Indianapolis, Indiana

TBA

### April 21-22

#### Fort Collins, Colorado

*Jesus in the 1st and 21st Centuries*

Arthur J. Dewey & Roy W. Hoover

#### Olathe, Kansas

*Jesus in the 1st and 21st Centuries*

Bernard Brandon Scott & Perry V. Kea

.5 CEUs each

See page 24 for registration form