

***The Jesus Myth.* Andrew M. Greeley. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971.**

### **Note**

"Myth" used "in a specific and definite sense:"

- Alan Watts: "The inner meaning of the universe and of human life."
- Charles Long: "The word and content of Myth are revelations of power."
- A.K. Coomaraswamy: "Myth embodies the nearest approach to absolute truth that can be stated in words."

"The Christian would be well advised to get over his fear of the word and appreciate how important a tool it can be for understanding the content of his faith."

### **ONE: THE FOUNDER OF THE FIRM**

"... a series of reflections from the religious symbolism of Jesus."

"There is nothing more real than men's symbols and myths."

The historical reality of Jesus' life and message are "the very core of the myth of Jesus."

"In dealing with the symbolism of Jesus of Nazareth we have to contend with a symbol that is drastically different from the other religious symbols of his own time or indeed of any time."

"Irrelevance" of Jesus: "He was irrelevant to his own world, too; so "irrelevant that it was necessary for him to be murdered."

One is "well advised to be skeptical about the demise of Christianity."

"Despite its apparent continuous irrelevancy it has still managed to survive."

Influence of Geertz acknowledged: religious as "a meaning system that can answer his fundamental problems about the interpretability of the universe."

"Most of us need, at least implicitly, some sort of rough and ready answers to questions of whether life has meaning."

Macbeth: signifying nothing.

Teilhard: something is afoot in the universe.

Modernity "made religion needs more acute, precisely because the meaning questions now become very explicit and conscious."

Christian theology and controversy have become too involved in "peripheral issues."

"The symbol of Jesus has become so encrusted with piety, theological controversy, and ecclesiastical triumphalism that it means very little."

Notes seminary suspicion of New Testament studies.

Greeley read Dodd, Jeremias, Bultmann, Fuller, Kasemann, Perrin, Marxsen, Higgins, Manson, Bornkamm.

He read "in search of deeper understanding of the faith to which I was firmly committed."

Quotes Küng (*The Church*): "Through the evangelists' testimonies of faith we can hear Jesus himself speaking."

The thrust of New Testament scholarship "has gone far beyond the debunking skepticism" of an earlier period.

When New Testament scholars "finally got that body of material which they think can be attributed to the historical Jesus, we do not find obscurity and uncertainty but rather a basic teaching and a fundamental self-understanding of irreducible clarity and power."

"When the symbolism of Jesus stands forth, unadorned by the reflection of the early Church, he is even more challenging."

Jesus was "unique, original, and startling." His self-understanding and message "shocked and frightened his contemporaries" and "we have done our best to obscure the shocking nature of the symbolism of Jesus ever since."

Greeley recommends beginning with Bornkamm's *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Scholarly opinions change, so "one must be wary of staking his religious commitments and convictions on the scholarly opinions currently in fashion."

Academic controversies "exist in a different order of knowledge and meaning than does one's ultimate interpretation of the universe."

Following Thomas Kuhn, Greeley notes the "paradigm" of New Testament scholarship. A disvalue of the current paradigm is that many scholars "seem unaware of the profound religious implications of their work." (Jeremias is a notable exception.)

Footnote: "... if some members of the younger generation are so shallow and superficial as to dismiss symbols that have shaped human thought for two millennia without investigating deeply the meaning of such symbols, that is their problem and not mine."

Jesus will be "relevant" ... "until the human race grows tired of pondering the meaning of life."

## **TWO: JESUS AND HIS TIMES**

Jesus "is a hard man to categorize."

Greeley quotes Manson's summary, and comments: "Jesus went about providing answers to questions no one was asking and refusing to answer the questions everyone thought important."

Jesus' situation: "For almost all the inhabitants of Palestine, the political and religious situation was intolerable. The past was superior to the present, and a much better future was eagerly anticipated."

Re: Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots – "Jesus satisfied none of them."

"Jesus rejected the titles, the categories, the theories, and the aspirations of all religious movements of his time."

"Many of the religious ideas and movements in Jesus' time have their counterpart in our own day." They "represent certain fundamental themes that are reasonably typical of the human condition."

"Reformers and revolutionaries, puritans and perfectionists, dreamers and defenders of the old order have always sought to find support for their positions in the teachings of Jesus, but he eludes their grasp just as effectively as he eluded the grasp of the movements in the currents of his own time."

"They were asking the wrong questions and using the wrong categories."

Quotes Manson: "For Jesus the will of God is primarily the forgiving, reconciling, redeeming love of God. And being what it is, it must express itself in a Divine act for men rather than in a Divine demand upon men; though this demand follows inevitably upon the act."

Believing Jesus "was too easy and too difficult."

*Contra* Edmund Wilson's article on the similarity of Jesus and the Qumran community, Greeley cites Ethelbert Stouffer's article outlining nine key differences. The Qumran monk "would have murdered Jesus as readily as the Pharisees and Sadducees."

Qumran heightened observance of the Law, especially the Sabbath. Jesus fundamentally repudiated this.

When the early Church used Jewish categories to describe Jesus, "the content of the category undergoes drastic change."

"Jesus was appallingly unique." He "came to preach a simple, profound, but quite straightforward message, one that jarred his audiences and led them to conclude, first of all, that he was irrelevant and, second, that he might very well be dangerous. His message was rejected by all the leading groups of his society, and because he persisted in it it was necessary to get rid of him."

"It is my contention that nothing much has changed."

"The rather simple, straightforward, and shocking message which Jesus came to bring was an attempt to redirect the course of human history, to change the style of human behavior and transform the nature of human relationships, and to reorder human life. It was an attempt which was not notably successful in his own time and has not achieved very much success since then."

Manson: Jesus' ministry "is the Kingdom at work in the world."

### **THREE: the kingdom of god is at hand**

"The Kingdom of God is at hand" = "the promise of God is about to be fulfilled."

“It was the notion of fulfillment of an age-old promise which most excited the crowds when Jesus emerged for his brief ministry of preaching. Something staggering, immense, overwhelming was about to happen.”

Greeley summarizes the core of Jesus' message around 5 propositions:

1. One must change one's life, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.”
2. The day of salvation has dawned.
3. The principal sign of the kingdom and its salvation is God's loving mercy.
4. No matter how the kingdom is opposed, and no matter what happens to it, the kingdom will triumph.
5. Since now we have heard the Good News of salvation of the triumph of the kingdom, we must rejoice. [40]

“The message is very simple and, through repetition down through the centuries, has become trite. But its simplicity and its triteness should not obscure for us the fact that the message responds to the most basic and agonizing question that faces all who are part of the human condition: Is everything going to be all right in the end? Jesus' response was quite literally to say, ‘You bet your life it is.’”

### One

Metanoia = “the transformation of the basic structures of one's life.”

Jesus clearly thought that the messianic age, the reign of God's kingdom, the eschatological banquet, call it what we will, had begun, and it had begun in and through him.

### Two

“The old age is finished; the turning point in human history has arrived; a new era has begun.”

Many different poetic images “indicate the same theme: a decisive turning point has occurred. And Jesus has come to announce it.”

### Three

God's intervention in history is one of mercy and love, not punishment and judgment. Thus, “Good News.”

Re: the parables – “Only a crazy shepherd of a foolish housewife would act so absurdly, just as only a slightly demented father would shower honor on him who was a wastrel. Finally, only an employer whose generosity had caused him to take leave of his senses would pay to those who had worked only one hour a whole day's wage.”

“The novel element in his Good News was that God's love was so powerful that it pushed Him to the point of insanity.”

French Easter liturgy: L'amour de Dieu est folie.

Greeley notes that the story of the adulterous woman was left out of some early versions of the Gospels : it was “shocking to the strict moralists of primitive Christianity.”

“The trouble with the God that Jesus claimed to represent is that he loves too much.”

Greeley reline of Jeremias on the parables.

Re: parables – “... the dizzy incredibility of their meaning.”

“Jesus is saying in fact that God’s love and mercy are so generous that similar generosity in humans would be deemed madness.”

#### Four

Jeremias on parables contrasting beginning and end, “expressing Jesus’ confidence concerning his mission.”

“God has intervened to begin the New Age.”

#### Five

Greeley quotes Perrin on “the joy and surprise theme” of the parables.

Perrin: “A man can suddenly be confronted by the experience of God and find the subsequent joy overwhelming and all determinative.”

“Again we are forced to note the extreme simplicity of the message of Jesus. An old era is done. God is intervening to begin a new age. It is an era of incredible generosity. One must change one’s live in order to benefit from the generosity, but so great is the payoff in accepting the abundance of the new age that our *metanoia* ought to be one not of sorrow and sacrifice but of wonder and rejoicing.”

“Jesus is saying that in the end it will be all right, that nothing can harm us permanently, that no suffering is irrevocable, that no loss is lasting, that no defeat is more than transitory, that no disappointment is conclusive.”

“The message of Jesus... deserves to be accepted or rejected for what it is: an answer to *the* most fundamental questions a man could ask.” – i.e., Is the Really Real loving or malign?

It is on this ground that we must accept or reject Jesus, not on matters of papal infallibility, or the virgin birth..., e.g.

Jesus “had come to bring Good News that the Really Real was love, and to demand from men joy and response to that love.”

“... the Romans were not the issue, (that) the law was not the issue, and (that) cosmic miracles were not the issue. God’s insanely generous love for us was the issue.”

Despite all the achievements of Christian history, “there are still precious few of us who go about with the same kind of joy as does the man who has found buried treasure.”

“Jesus was rejected and ultimately executed not because of greed or ambition or fear, but, rather, because of cynicism.”

Cynicism/pessimism/despair defeats Jesus.

Jesus revelation: Reality is gracious.

The distinctness of a Christian is not creedal, ritual, or ethical, but rather that his assurance of the love of God brings a "confidence and joy (that) transfuse everything he does."

"What he does is much less likely to distinguish him from others as the way he does it."

"Despite all the social progress we have made since A.D. 30, distrust, suspicion, hatred, injustice, misery, fear are as pervasive in the world today as they were in Jesus' own time. It has not dawned on us that a man's fundamental view of the nature of reality can have a profound effect on his ability to cope with social and human problems."

"The message of Jesus is relevant precisely because it provides the underpinnings of conviction about the basic nature of reality without which we will never be able to change the world."

Faith enables us to keep going.

"Frustration, discouragement, defeat, and disappointment are constant. If one does not have some fundamental conviction, he will either give up in cynicism or become authoritarian, determined to force men to be virtuous."

This is also true in personal relationships.

"Discouragement is the ultimate foe; a foe which can be overcome only if one's notion of the fundamental nature of the universe forbids surrender to it."

Chesterton: "the men who are signed with the cross of Christ / Go gaily in the dark."

"He who believes in the kingdom have no choice but to respect and reverence fellow citizens of the kingdom."

"Christianity denies no human aspiration; it rather asserts confidently that these aspirations are valid. But its very confidence modifies the style of our pursuit of our aspiration in such a way that now, for the first time, achieving them ought to become possible."

#### **FOUR: THE CALL FOR A DECISION**

"Response to Jesus is not subject to description in terms of ethical formula."

Attempts to find behavioral formulas to specify this response have taken many different forms: early church concern for Mosaic law; 6<sup>th</sup> century Irish penitential monasticism; 19<sup>th</sup> century search for the historical Jesus as an "ethical teacher"; 20<sup>th</sup> century concern for "personality fulfillment."

Response to Jesus "does prescribe an ethic, not as a way to enter the kingdom, but as a result of an acceptance of the Kingdom."

Greeley quotes Perrin: "There is nothing in that teaching about standards of conduct or moral judgments, there is only the urgent call to recognize the challenge of the proclamation and to respond to it."

"The fundamental ethical challenge was to accept the kingdom, to choose decisively in favor or it, to become a part of it now before it is too late." (Cf. parable of the 10 virgins). "We have a choice of entering this splendid, joyous celebration or standing aside from it."

Parables = "a weapon he used in controversy to demand a response."

"... we must act boldly, resolutely, and courageously, for if we do not, we will have suffered a tragic loss."

Perrin, re: Good Samaritan – "Because one knows God as responding to human needs in terms of the eschatological forgiveness of sins, one must respond to the needs of a neighbor in terms of whatever may be appropriate to the immediate situation."

"... as men experience God's love for them, they respond to other human beings with love and, in that response, come to understand God's love better."

Metanoia is "a transformation of one's life that is accomplished in a basic existential leap." Ethical behavior is a consequence of that leap.

"If we permit ourselves to experience God's love, then that love is so powerful that it bursts forth from our personality and spreads to all around us."

"Protestants and Catholics alike since the sixteenth century have lived their lives as though Christianity was an exercise of certain carefully detailed specific responsibilities."

Faith is "the commitment of the total person."

"Symbols precede analysis." Full understanding of the implications of our decision follows that decision.

"Jesus made the issue very simple and pleaded with us to make up our minds, and we have responded by making the issue very complex."

"... the story of Christianity as a long chronicle of how people have evaded the decision that Jesus expects of them."

Greeley refers to his experience of a small group community who began as a Christian community, but "suddenly... realized the immense demands that the commitment would make on them for the rest of their lives, how much they would have to give up, how many of their foolish fears and defenses they would have to put away..."

Rather than take the chance, the group "fell back on the defensive patterns of childhood."

"People do not want to let go."

In formalized responses (whether canon law, revolution, or personality fulfillment) "one is still in control. One's own selfhood is still nicely contained. The force of God's love is carefully limited."

"It is of utmost importance that one think clearly about the relationship between faith and personality."

Religious commitment and personality growth are neither unrelated nor identical.

"... acceptance of the Kingdom and acceptance of life in all its fullness are virtually the same act."

"... man's hunger for the absolute and the ultimate, for life and love, is a valid hunger and one to which Life and Love will respond. The message of the kingdom asserts that the fundamental thrust of the human personality is in fact a response to the Really Real."

"... the Christian message... provides greater assurance that the thrust is not a vain one."

"In every thrust of the human person to transcend the limitations of his being, there is certainly an implicit, at least at the time of commitment, notion that reality is good. What Christianity adds is a great deal more confidence and assurance that the struggle for wholeness is worth the price and that it will ultimately end in triumph."

"Jesus' challenge... is a challenge for explicit, conscious, confident and permanent response. He who understands this challenge and tries to limit his response to an implicit affirmation is caught in a difficult if not impossible psychological bind."

"... that invitation is a highly concrete invitation with a highly concrete promise. Jesus demands that we accept his Good News that reality is love and that we open ourselves especially so that love flows into us and out of us to all around. The enthusiastic acceptance of the invitation to the wedding feast involved in this challenge may not be the only way to become more fully human, but one is forced to assent that it is the best way that man has yet devised."

"Personal transformation, then, of the gospel message comes about not from engaging in certain ethical acts but from a total transformation of one's life from unbelief to belief."

Most of us Christians accept and live by that message just enough to get by. But "indecisiveness is ultimately a rejection of the message of Jesus, and there is much in the history of the Church that represents rejection." (Triumphalism, parochialism, dishonesty, authoritarianism, stereotyping/scapegoating are collective/ecclesial failures. Pietism, zealotry, rationalism, and faddism are personal failures.)

"... there has always been a crisis of faith."

Today, many people who had thought one or more of these evasions were really faith have discovered that these evasions are not adequate answer to the challenge of Jesus.

"The masks and props which have supported us have been taken away."

"We hesitate at the doorway."

## **FIVE: "WHO DID HE THINK HE WAS?"**



Irish put-down: "Who do you think you are?"

Re: our attempt to categorize Jesus – "It is as though we are imposing on Jesus the requirement that he speak in exactly those categories that would enable him to fit smoothly and painlessly into the categories of Apologetics 101."

Jesus was reluctant to apply titles to himself.

Two most likely titles: "Son of Man" and "the servant of the Lord."

Post-resurrection Christian experience impelled believers to understand their overwhelming experience, and "they fell back on the categories they had at hand."

"They took the symbols available to them and tried to use them to convey the reality of their experience."

"The symbols they used were the best ones they could find to relate honestly what they had seen and heard and felt."

"First of all, man experiences God profoundly, powerfully, as being present in a very special way. In trying to describe this experience to others, he used, modifies, and adjusts the religious symbols available to him. Then as he moves into other cultures, he tries to integrate into his presentation philosophical symbols. Finally, when the community of those committed to that experience become organized, he strives to elaborate a precise theological synthesis, hoping, of course, that the clarity and precision of the synthesis does no serious harm to the vitality and energy of the original insight and experience."

What matters is whether the early Christian use of titles was true to Jesus' message."

R. Fuller and A.J.B. Higgins argue persuasively that "this use of these symbols was perfectly valid."

Jesus' self-understanding is revealed in his words and deeds, whether he used titles or not: Jesus claimed that in his words and life the kingdom of God is actually present.

Fuller: "In Jesus as he understands himself, there is an immediate confrontation with 'God's presence and his very self' offering judgment and salvation."

"Jesus thought of himself, preached, and behaved as though he was the Son of God in a special and unique sense."

"The notion that Jesus was an ethical teacher and apocalyptic prophet is one of the most extraordinary clever and systematic conspiracies that man has ever developed."

Rather, Jesus "asserted that in him and through him God was intimately present in human events."

Jeremias focuses on "amen" (preaching with authority) and "Abba" (intimacy with God): if we had only these two words, we would have enough to be able to understand his message.

*Audemus dicere* is an ancient prelude to the Lord's Prayer: "Jesus was not merely the one so intimate with the Father that he would dare to address Him in a familiar tone; he was also the one to make it possible for the rest of us to speak to God, the Really Real, the Ground of Being, the Absolute, the Ultimate, the Infinite, in terms of affectionate familiarity."

Greeley criticized Louis Evely for his demythologization.

Jesus "refused to put a label on himself that would enable them to pigeonhole him in categories of their own religious thought."

Whatever the stated reasons for Jesus' execution, "the real problem was that he made himself like God; he even went so far as to suggest that in his name we could too."

"We have incarcerated this claim of Jesus into harmless, trite formulations which, though frequently repeated, have no concrete impact on our lives."

"Those who come after him would have to cope with not just the message, not just the absurdity that God is a lover, passionate to the point of insanity, but also with the blasphemy that God becomes intimately available to us in the person of Jesus."

"... through him we could address the Ground of Being as Daddy."

"He was a man with serene confidence in the nature of his mission and uncompromising integrity in its execution."

Compromise would have made things easier for his contemporaries and for us; but "how can you back down when you are convinced that you can call God *Abba*?"

A way of sidestepping the issue: "we seize upon some passages in the New Testament which have some kind of an apocalyptic element in them to emphasize the urgency of escaping judgment instead of the urgency of accepting love."

"But why can we not accept love? Perhaps because its demands never end."

Jesus "constantly calls forth the very totality of our persons."

"If God were going to intervene in history, why didn't he choose the Greeks or Romans? They were rational people. But the Jews were crazy madmen, already engaged in a strange love affair with their rather odd God, Yahweh."

Great men are killed because "they bother us."

Jesus "continues to bother us."

"... his authenticity and his integrity are too strong for our attempts to categorize him."

## **SIX: JESUS, THE MAN OF HOPE**

Much traditional piety makes Jesus into a puppet, who knew everything and played his role. "In such a view of things there was little room in the life of Jesus for hope."

Baum: Hope is the belief "that tomorrow will be different."

Much contemporary discussion of a better future leaves little room for the individual.

Jesus' message of hope is less future-oriented: "the full message of Jesus is based on not so much the expectation of something that is yet to come as on the announcement and celebration of something already present."

Christian Duquoc: Jesus' hope exists with the utter weakness of his personal situation.

Jesus "is so confident in God that he can afford to be feeble and thereby give the Really Real complete freedom to manifest his love for us."

"Hope and the dawning age are the free and gratuitous loving intervention of the Really Real."

"Jesus' hope... is not based on blind optimism. It is rooted in the experience of God present in him, loving and transforming the world."

Thus, Jesus is willing to wait. It is sufficient to know that God loves, and to trust in that love.

Utopianism is "optimism needing verification." (Duquoc)

"Jesus was a deeply disappointed man, but none of his disappointment, none of his failure caused him to lose hope because, as Duquoc puts it, 'the Kingdom is where there exists neither self-assessment nor demonstrations of power but communion with God.'"

Contemporary utopians interpret disappointments/failures as "a part of the inevitable historical process tending toward victory."

"But for Jesus and the Christian, defeats, failures, disappointments are very real indeed. One puts hope not in the collection of defeats culminating in victory but in the promise of the Father that victory is already present and will eventually manifest itself completely."

The Christian is a realist who recognizes that man left to himself has not been able to make the world a much better place; non-Christian hope believes, contrary to evidence, that we can do it alone.

The Christian is more likely to be able to sustain his commitment.

Juan Alfaro: "... death... is a radical call to take the decision of hope... Death presents man with the option between an autonomous existence, limited to its possibilities in this world (a choice which is fundamental, whether it takes the form of heroic or fatalistic despair, or nausea at living, or an alienated existence ignoring death), and brave open existence trusting in hope of a transcendent future."

A Christian's expectation of this gift is more likely to hope and is thus more likely committed to life.

Hope, Alfaro says, is an “exodus:” going out of oneself, without any guarantee, trusting solely in the divine promise. This involves “a breaking of the moorings of all assurance in oneself and in the world, and a tossing of the anchor into the bottomless depths of the mystery of God in Christ.”