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Jesus and Early Christianity in the Gospels: A New Dialogue. By Daniel J. Grolin.
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What is the value of scholarship for interfaith dialogue? Ideally, scholarship can provide a common ground of expertise from which dialogue might proceed. Scholars may be regarded as arbiters (but not the sole judges) of textual authenticity and of the contemporary–historical interpretation of sacred text. These experts themselves are in dialogue. Their investigations, which are methodologically self-conscious, virtual discussions, constitute a ‘community of discourse’ within a given ‘research tradition’. While their personal beliefs are supposed to be ‘bracketed’ in favour of achieving a ‘critical empathy’ for the religious traditions they study, biases may be disguised and insinuated into research results. Still, one could hardly ask for a more dispassionate inquiry into matters of sacred text. In Baha’i parlance, one might say that academic scholarship is a corporate form of the ‘independent investigation of truth’. And it is into this world of scholarship that author Daniel Grolin invites us to participate as active spectators – in preparation for both a search after truth and a Baha’i–Christian dialogue.

Jesus and Early Christianity in the Gospels is an introduction to the gospel narratives (both canonical and apocryphal), with an overarching interest in interfaith dialogue, as indicated by the subtitle, *A New Dialogue*. A dialogue actually begins in the foreword contributed by Jens Buchwald Andersen, University Chaplain of the University of Southern Denmark in Odense, who rightly observes that the figure of Jesus does not belong to Christianity alone. Andersen states that ‘the person of Jesus Christ [not only] plays a role in other religions and faiths such as Judaism, Islam and Bahā’ī but also in Hinduism, for instance in the figure of Mahatma Gandhi . . . or most recently in Buddhism, say in the reading of the gospels by the Dalai Lama’ (pp. xiii–xiv). While Judaism played a formative role in the life and thought of Jesus, one might ask what role Jesus plays in Judaism? In any event, the figure of Jesus is no longer the exclusive interest of Christians.

One may even speak of a certain ‘globalization’ of the figure of Jesus, as theologians in nearly every major world religion have reflected on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus has become universalized in ways quite unanticipated by the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – and Thomas. ‘*The Gospel of Thomas*’, Grolin states, ‘is undoubtedly the most significant discovery in recent times for New Testament studies’ (p. 7). *Thomas* is a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus, and is the first solid evidence we have of a primitive gospel that must have been a source (or ‘Q’, after the German term *quelle*, ‘source’) common to Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount and Luke’s Sermon on the Plain.

Any interfaith dialogue in which Jesus is at the heart of the matter necessarily involves Christians as a party to the discussion. For the dialogue to be meaningful, each party must ‘witness’ to his or her own understanding of the salvific and vivifying role of Jesus Christ. For interfaith dialogue to be constructive and productive, it must agree to rules – ideally, to a certain procedure for reaching common ground. As the Revd Andersen states, Grolin’s intention is ‘to find a neutral platform for the discussion of the figure of Jesus Christ,’ by using ‘the methods and the insights of the Historical Jesus research’ (p. xiii).

Grolin adapts the so-called ‘Third Quest for the Historical Jesus’ as his framework of analysis (p. xiii); that is, he draws heavily on the methodology of New Testament scholarship. The author’s purpose, therefore, is to provide ‘a study guide’ that is ‘intended to be used in a study of the actual text’ of the four Gospels. While ‘[e]xegesis is one of the primary interests of this book’ (p. viii), *Jesus and Early Christianity in the Gospels* is ‘not intended as a commentary’ per se, ‘for its purpose is not merely to comment on specific verses but rather to demonstrate a type of methodology’.

A methodology is really a philosophical orientation, while the discrete methods that are undertaken represent the application of the overall approach. Grolin’s own procedure is to interrogate the gospel narratives by means of three investigative questions: (1) What is the origin of a given

gospel tradition and how was it understood? (2) How has the evangelist taken up that tradition and used (and possibly transformed) it for his own purposes? (3) ‘How was the tradition, as we find it in the gospels, used later by Christians?’ (p. xi).

Christian interpretation extends the authority of scripture but, in a very real way, supplants whatever its ‘original intent’ may have been in favour of a current interpretation that accords with a contemporary understanding of who Jesus was and what it means to be a Christian. ‘Interpretation creates meaning’, as the present writer states in the opening paragraph of *Symbol and Secret* (1995). Interpretations of sacred text amount to a separate *textus receptus*. In any given tradition, the body of interpretations are really a matter of historical record. Christian theology has a developmental history and may thus be subjected to historical scrutiny. History, in a sense, then becomes a judge of authenticity whenever a particular interpretation claims pre-eminence and arrogates authority – rightly or wrongly – to itself. Grolin’s instinct in asking his third question is precisely along these lines.

As a self-professed Baha’i author (p. iv), Daniel Grolin initiates a new dialogue, which is by no means restricted to the Baha’i–Christian encounter. The author proposes that each party takes cognizance of the ‘science of religion’ and utilize scholarship to rethink basic assumptions about Jesus and what the real purpose his life and teachings served. In his first chapter, ‘The Critical Sciences’ (pp. 1–13), Grolin reviews the methods current in New Testament scholarship. Here, the author introduces the reader to source criticism, redaction criticism, form criticism, historical criticism, textual criticism, patriology (known in North America as patristics, or a formal study of the Church Fathers), and ‘the sociological perspective’ (referring to sociology of religion). Grolin’s objective is to provide an introduction to the gospels informed by the methods of what used to be termed ‘Higher Criticism’, extended to non-canonical texts as well, such as the Gospel of Thomas (sometimes referred to as the ‘Fifth Gospel’) as mentioned above, and an early Christian manual of religious practice known as the Didache. (See Appendix 3, ‘The Origin of the Didache’.) Other New Testament apocryphal texts are mentioned as well.

Chapter 2 covers ‘The Jewish Context’. This is a fairly straightforward treatment of the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Samaritans, and various popular and prophetic movements (pp. 14–53) in the first century. (This is not exhaustive, as Rechabites and equally obscure groups are not mentioned.) In other words, Grolin establishes the historical context – the world Jesus knew. Chapter 3, ‘The Birth of a New Dispensation’ (pp. 54–85), begins with an excursus on Christological controversy sparked by Arius at the end of the 3rd century which resulted in the Nicene Creed as an articulation of orthodoxy (literally, ‘correct belief’), and heterodoxy. Here, some reference to Walter Bauer’s classic, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* – which calls into question the very categories of orthodoxy and heresy – would have been welcome.

Grolin explains the Logos (‘Word made flesh’) Christology of the Prologue of John in light of Philo of Alexandria, and critically compares the genealogies of Matthew and Luke. The author also compares and contrasts the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, without attempting to achieve a ‘gospel harmony’ as many theologians have laboured to produce, as early as Tatian’s *Diatessaron* (the earliest gospel used by Syriac-speaking Christians, a text that Grolin mentions on p. 216).

Chapter 4, ‘Baptism’, covers the four gospel accounts of John the Baptist, prior to an analysis of Jesus’ baptism. Grolin’s excursus on ‘The Baptismal Sacrament’ precedes an interesting treatment of ‘the Temptation of Christ’, with reference to the theoretical document ‘Q’ (mentioned above). The author invokes Elaine Pagels’ *The Origin of Satan* (1995) to suggest that Christ’s tempter was not an evil principality, as the Christian tradition assumes, but rather an adversary sent by God to test Jesus. Here, Grolin might have extended the discussion to include references in the Rabbinical tradition to Satan as a personification of the *yetzer ha-ra*, or ‘corrupt inclination’ – an idea derived from Gen. 8: 21, ‘the imagination of the heart of man is evil from his youth’ – for which the figure of Satan is merely a personification. (Strange to say, but evangelical Christianity requires a belief in Satan as well as in Christ. For Baha’is, belief in Satan amounts to superstition, put bluntly – although Baha’u’llah rhetorically treats ‘Satan’ as the personification of human evil.)

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‘The Proclamation of Christ’ is the focus of Chapter 5 (pp. 114–51), one section of which deals with ‘Parables’ (pp. 133–48). Again, Grolin ties in Q-scholarship in a close analysis of selected parables. ‘The Mighty Works’ (Chapter 6, pp. 152–90), covers the miracle traditions, including the Transfiguration. This is an important chapter for Grolin, who, in his conclusion, states: ‘The category that the present work has promoted above most others has been the Elijah-Elisha model’ (p. 344). Grolin perceptively points out that the ‘sayings tradition’ effectively ‘rejects the visual, faith-generating miracles’ (p. 185). The author partly bases this conclusion on what has come to be known as the ‘Sign-Refusal Saying’ of Jesus (Mark 8: 12; Matt. 12: 38–40; and Luke 11: 29–30), a concept that Grolin discusses without recourse to this technical term.

Chapter 7, ‘Jerusalem’, looks at Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and his cleansing of the Temple. In ‘The End Foreshadowed’ (Chapter 8, pp. 204–45) Grolin examines the ‘passion predictions’ or Jesus’ foreknowledge of his impending crucifixion (which systematic theology refers to as the ‘passion’ of Christ). This chapter includes sections on the Farewell Discourse (John 14–16) as well as the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13, Matt. 24–25, and Luke 21), also known as the Minor Apocalypse. Instinctively drawing on philological discussions of such texts, Grolin frequently glosses key Koine Greek words in each gospel pericope.

‘The Lord’s Last Supper’ is the subject of Chapter 9 (pp. 246–63), with a section on ‘The Eucharist’. Here is where the author brings the earliest Christian worship manual, the *Didache*, into relevance, for its reflexive value in illuminating the origins of this central Christian sacrament. The chapter ends with an excursus on ‘The Eucharist Sacrament’, giving a brief survey of the various ways in which the Eucharist was understood to work, including the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation and the Lutheran notion of ‘consubstantiation’ (although the author does not use the latter term).

Grolin makes the transition to ‘The Crucifixion’ (Chapter 10, pp. 264–99) with an excursus on ‘The Crucifixion from the Middle Ages to the Reformation’. The penultimate Chapter 11, ‘The Resurrection’ (pp. 300–40) is, in many ways, Grolin’s most important chapter insofar as his critical commentary on the gospel narratives is concerned, for on it hinges a cosmic event that is the crux of Christian faith and, by extension, a key concern of Baha’i–Christian dialogue. The author devotes a section to ‘The Empty Tomb’, with a more extended treatment of ‘The Appearances’. This is a particularly masterful overview of the competing traditions and the complex issues they raise. Grolin includes the findings of the Jesus Seminar in his discussion. There is then a short section ‘Concluding Thoughts’ (pp. 341–45).

While the author is a professed Baha’i author, publishing through a privately-owned Baha’i publisher, he judiciously reserves everything connected to a specifically Baha’i perspective for Appendix 1, ‘Interpretation and Rewriting of the Gospels in the Bahā’ī Writings’ (pp. 346–72). In Appendix 2, ‘A New Inter-Religious Dialogue’, Grolin makes it clear that ‘we are here specifically interested in dialogue between Bahā’īs and Christians,’ and that ‘Bahā’īs have explicit doctrinal interest in a dialogue’ (p. 373). What, then, is Grolin’s contribution to this dialogue? His answer is twofold: (1) the author has chosen to ‘highlight many of the important social and ethical issues’ that arose within early Christianity; and (2) his methodology ‘treats the gospels not as a divinely dictated text but as an inspired and spiritually living religious text’ (p. 375). Grolin’s ‘new dialogue’, therefore, is a quest for common ground, ‘to unite diverse religious traditions to form a coherent message for humankind’ (p. 376), with a view ‘not to seek conversions, but to gain mutual understanding’ (p. 377).

What is the significance of this book for interfaith dialogue in general and Baha’i–Christian encounters in particular? Note how Grolin characterizes scholarship in the opening paragraph of Chapter 1, ‘The Critical Sciences’:

The last two centuries have seen a remarkable development within the field of biblical scholarship, much of which has been kept in scholarly circles. This is partly because scholarship itself has been divided over the legitimacy of these new sciences but also because of the vast tradition of the exclusiveness of scholarly knowledge. Some of the pioneers of

these sciences were ostracized, persecuted or even excommunicated from their churches or synagogues and sometimes charges of heresy were laid against them. The fact that secularization promoted these sciences made the delineation even more distinct. Today the warring factions have made their arena public and the media is used more relentlessly, so the existence of these sciences is generally known but their significance is still generally poorly grasped. (p. 1)

As Grolin points out in the opening paragraph, the results of scholarship have either been unavailable to the general population, or have existed in perceived tension (or even in conflict) with basic tenets as popularly understood within a particular faith community. This has all too often led to unfortunate results, in which the enterprise of scholarship has been seriously questioned, notwithstanding its role in posing critical questions and venturing possible solutions that amount to new ways of looking at sacred texts. And the scholars themselves have occasionally been stigmatized or otherwise marginalized. It is frankly safer to be a computer systems engineer than a specialist in the academic study of religion or in Middle East studies. Notwithstanding, scholarship is of huge importance in establishing a common ground of understanding that is objectively based and from which constructive dialogue might proceed.

Does the Baha'i principle of the harmony of science and religion apply to what the Germans call '*religionwissenschaft*' ('science of religion')? If so, then should Baha'i self-understanding itself be constrained by scientific principle? It is hard to say. What, then, is the authority of scholarship? It has no religious authority in Baha'i terms, except that, at least in pilgrim's notes, Shoghi Effendi would sometimes say that Baha'is ought to tentatively accept the results of scholarship in the absence of definitive pronouncements in the Baha'i writings. Here, Grolin is careful to disclaim any authoritative value in that 'the present work can in no way claim to be a final product but must remain a temporary result based on the author's personality and the information available to him' (p. 381).

The results of Grolin's research can hardly be described as 'temporary'. *Jesus and Early Christianity in the Gospels* is no *Thief in the Night* (a famous Baha'i apologetic work that has tremendous verve but is oblivious to New Testament criticism). What Grolin has done is to say to both Christians and Baha'is that scholarship may provide the basis for a 'new dialogue'. Certainly Grolin has broken new ground in offering to Baha'is and Christians alike an accessible introduction to the world of New Testament scholarship.

Of even greater significance is Grolin's underlying message that scholarship, while 'safer' in secular environments, ought to be embraced by religious communities as well. Grolin makes it clear that his book 'seeks to be historical and exegetical rather than mythic and theological' (p. x). This is why all the Baha'i material is reserved for Appendix 1. This was a mature and disciplined decision. As the present writer has endeavoured to do in *Paradise and Paradigm: Key Symbols in Persian Christianity and the Baha'i Faith* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), Daniel Grolin has attempted a meaningful comparison of the Baha'i Faith and Christianity on a methodologically sound basis. What I have called 'symbolic transformation' of Christian leitmotifs in Baha'i texts, Grolin has aptly characterized as 'Interpretation and Rewriting of the Gospels in the Bahā'ī Writings' (p. 346).

Some of Grolin's interpretations are quite novel, such as his explanation of the shorter ending of Mark (pp. 339–40), as well as his interpretation of Q's temptation narrative (pp. 102–13), and his thoughts on the construction of the Historical Jesus (pp. 343–45). Within the reflective sphere of his originality, Grolin maintains a distinction between theology and exegesis: 'The exegete attempts to recover the lost hidden image behind the symbol' (p. viii). Theology, according to St Anselm, is 'faith seeking understanding'. In Grolin's more vital interest in exegesis, he achieves, as it were, an 'understanding seeking faith' – especially an insight into the faith of primitive Christians dimly limned in the shadows of pre-gospel sources. *Jesus and Early Christianity in the Gospels* is a

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testament to Grolin's faith in scholarship. Ultimately, Grolin shows how faiths can achieve a mutual understanding – first through historical and then by comparative quests.

Grolin is an independent scholar who has written a relatively mature work applying his scientific acumen (his formal training is in computer studies) to the problems of New Testament criticism. While the book lacks a grand thesis, it has a definite framework of analysis. While shy of the polish of a seasoned writer (English is the author's second language), the reviewer as well as the reader must bear in mind that this is Grolin's first book. It is a major undertaking that deserves our attention. *Jesus and Early Christianity in the Gospels* stands out as the most valuable Baha'i contribution to Baha'i-Christian dialogue to date. A proactive rather than a reactive work, this book has made the quantum leap from the 'search after proof' to the 'search after truth'. Those who purchase *Jesus and Early Christianity in the Gospels* will have done likewise.

Christopher Buck
Michigan State University