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The Naked Now

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I am basing the talks I offer in here on teachings from “The Gospel of Thomas.” We are up to saying 37. Here it is:

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His disciples said, “When will you appear to us, and when will we see you?”

Jesus said, “When you strip without being ashamed, and you take your clothes and put them under your feet like little children and trample them, then you will see the son of the living one and you will not be afraid.”

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There are 114 sayings attributed to Jesus in the collection that is called “The Gospel of Thomas.” Some of these sayings, such as this one, are unique to this collection. Some are to be found in one or more of the Jesus narratives found in the Christian Testament. Some of these sayings, the Jesus scholars say, are not only authentic teachings of Jesus but are even the earliest version of the saying that we have. Some of the sayings, just like some sayings attributed to Jesus in the Christian Testament, - indeed! perhaps the majority of them - are things the scholars are certain Jesus did not say.

I am aware that what I just said could not be said, at least without repercussions, in the vast majority of organizations that call themselves “Christian churches” in this world, Protestant or Catholic. To say that something that is in “the Bible” where Jesus is reported speaking is something he did not say is considered by many people to be out-and-out heresy. I’m aware of that.

When I was a child I was given by the church my parents and, consequently, I attended; a Bible. It was not just any sort of Bible but was a special Bible. It was called “a red letter” edition of the Bible. It was called that because the words of Jesus were printed in red.

I must have been a cantankerous 9 or 10 year-old child because not only was my mother always telling me to “be sweet” - “Now, ‘be sweet’ William!” - but also I thought from the very beginning that the things Jesus said were not nearly as

impressive as the things he did. At least as the story was told to me. He could make the blind see, the lame to walk and even could raise the dead. All of that was pretty cool. None of what Jesus did was in red. I thought that was odd.

Though I know no one in this space thinks or believes so, there are millions of people on this planet who not just “believe” but who “know” that the Bible was in some miraculous way handed to present-day Christians, usually Protestants, in its current state. For these people the collection of writings called “The Holy Bible” is not a human creation but something divinely inspired. For these people the Scriptures of other religious traditions, not so special.

To me, and this is just my personal conclusion and you will have to come to your own, this trivializes all Sacred Writings from all traditions. This world view or kind of thinking is also at the root of most of the violence in this world as well. More about that in a moment.

The history and scholarship that undergirds our current understanding of how we got the writings in the Christian tradition and who the “Jesus of history,” that is the actual person behind the story, is not only fascinating but it continues to evolve.

Until around the late 1600’s, and for a variety of reasons, these matters were not seriously considered by virtually anyone. Most people were unable to read, basic survival issues took up most waking hours, there was no printing press and so forth.

Now we know, and have known for several centuries, much more about the history of the writings in the Christian tradition than most current Christians are aware of. This is a shame. It is like being unaware of the advances in medicine. Or, as I said a couple of weeks ago, it is like changing everything in your wardrobe as you continue to grow except the shoes you wore in the first grade.

I heard recently of a woman who went to her medical doctor and said, “I’ve consulted an astrologer, a tea reader and a psychic.” The doctor said, “And what did those quacks tell you?” She said, “They told me to come see you.”

In the earliest Christian movement, there were actually many different writings circulated, and many traditions about the sayings of Jesus. There was not, until the fourth century, just one way to be Christian. Some of the leaders were concerned to say, “Well, which of these writings can be read in church? Which are the right ones? Which are the best ones?” A man whose name was Irenaeus, the leader of a church in France in about the year 170, declared that, “The heretics boast that they have many more gospels than there really are. But really they don’t have any gospels that aren’t full of blasphemy. There actually are only four authentic gospels. And this is obviously true because there are four corners of the universe and there are four principal winds, and therefore there can be only four gospels that are authentic. These, besides, are written by Jesus’ true followers.”

Solid reasoning there!

(You can read/learn more by searching the internet. Here is one example - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/emergence.html>)

I think I have spent some of the most exciting and productive years of my time as a spiritual teacher learning about the Jesus of history, who he was and what he actually had to say. I’m not going to repeat that material again. You can go back and search through the archives of talks on the Ordinary Life website. Also, if you are interested in this, you can read about not only what is called “the quest for the Jesus of history” but also the methodology that scholars use to determine what Jesus did and didn’t say in two books that ought to be in your library any way.

One is “The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say, The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus.” The only complaint I have about this book is that it gives the impression that the Gospel of Thomas is a Gospel narrative like the other four in the Christian collection. It is not. Thomas has no story line. But you will find in the introduction of this book an explanation of the history of what is called “the quest for the Jesus of history” and an explanation of the methodology used to determine what are the "authentic" teachings of Jesus in contrast to those created by his followers.

The other book, which is a narrative and served as a resource for my teaching for many months in here is “The Gospel of Jesus.” Though purported to be the result

of the Jesus Seminar, it is really a reflection of the biblical genius Robert Funk. This book should also be in your library.

Though there have been many, many books written about the life of Jesus, one of the most recent by scholar Reza Aslan titled “Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth,” there have to my knowledge been only two other relatively modern efforts to produce a “Gospel of Jesus.” This one by Funk, one by Stephen Mitchell and one by Thomas Jefferson.

One of the reasons that spiritual teachers such as myself, Richard Rohr, Jim Finley, Cynthia Bourgeault and others stress the importance of growth in religious as well as spiritual intelligence is that it is possible for people to be brilliant in a variety of fields but remain at a third grade level when it comes to being open in their understanding of their religion. They accept not only without question but also with a great deal of defensiveness anything that they fear would call into question anything they hold to be true.

I started teaching Jesus of history material in here at least fifteen years ago. A dozen years ago I was actually lucky enough to get to go to a meeting of the Jesus Seminar in New York. The Sunday before I was to leave I was speaking to people as they left one of the worship services across the way. A woman, academically very educated, said as she left the building, “Well, I’ll see you next week.” “No,” I responded, “I won’t be here next week. I going to go to the Jesus Seminar meeting.” I was so excited. She responded with alarm, “Really? Aren’t you afraid that will damage your faith?”

One of the great failings of the Christian movement, perhaps from the fourth century on but certainly from the time of the Reformation, is that various sects of the Christian movement not only did not teach people in various Christian education programs what was actually going on in the fields of religious and biblical studies but, and this is even worse, did not teach people how to see. The church in its various manifestations did not get people to look into and trust their own experience but simply said, “Here is what is true. Believe this.”

“If you dance, play cards, drink or associate with people who do; you’ll go to hell when you die.”

“If you are not baptized by immersion, your baptism isn’t valid.”

“Because Jews don’t believe in Jesus, they will not go to heaven.”

“God had Jesus die because you are such a sinful person.”

There are, of course, the non-religious messages we are given and also told are true:

Race is real.

Money is power and security.

Guns make people safe.

War solves problems.

And on and on it goes.

One of the reasons I present from time to time different models of how we grow and mature, or at least how we in my opinion should, is because we don’t so much see “what is” as we see “what is because of the way we see.” If we see with the dualistic mind, we will be caught in perpetual judgment and divisiveness. One of the ways to describe a person on a path of perpetual growth is that she or he is always denying things they once affirmed as true.

I am, just as every other human on the planet, formed by the culture into which I was born. I can’t help but to draw on it for ideas and concepts I take to be true. But, the more open I am to insights from developmental psychology, theology, philosophy, history, the mystics of all religions the larger world I get to live in.

Some time ago I was talking to a dear friend of mine who happens to be homosexual. He was telling me how, at least for him, the phrase “coming out of the closet” is so misleading. He said it was not like one day he woke up and realized he was gay and decided to announce that to the world. He said it was more like

walking down a very dark and narrow hall that, over a long time, kept getting wider and better illuminated until one day he realized he was living in this space that was well lit and without walls. That, by the way, is one of the great biblical metaphors for what it means to be saved. Being saved is having room to move around in, not being fenced in.

So one of the things I've been interested in and concerned about most all of my conscious life is what is it that keeps we humans from seeing clearly, from reading reality truthfully, wisely and usefully. Why is it, especially people at the highest levels of organized religion are so imprisoned? Why have religions, for the most part, stopped doing their job of spiritually transforming people and cultures?

This teaching from the Gospel of Thomas we are looking at today is about the willingness and the ability to see.

As people joined the particular community that produced this collection of teachings of Jesus, they would be taught things that Jesus said. These sayings began to be written down, who knows when the collection started, because that was part of the Jewish tradition - to collect teachings of one's master. As the founder of the movement receded in history, his followers became his interpreter. It was also common to put words into the mouth of the original teacher. What we have in the Gospel of John is almost entirely this sort of thing. What passes as the most quoted, and some think even essential, Bible verse, John 3:16, is not something Jesus said but something that was put into the mouth of Jesus as an interpretation of him by the early community.

Some scholars think that this particular teaching may have something to do with the tradition, that developed very early, of people getting or putting on new garments after being baptized into the community. Perhaps. But, a more likely, to me, interpretation has to do with the huge emphasis in the teaching and life of Jesus of not only seeing and being willing to be seen but also that of becoming childlike in one's radical trust on the God who gave Jesus his identity. Or, more accurately, from whom Jesus got his identity.

I have said to you before that it is virtually impossible for us to enter the world or the world-view of Jesus or of those who collected and wrote these sayings. We have been birthed into the Western world.

The religions of the East and the religious of the West both have their limits. Being birthed in the West has caused many people to turn, beginning in this country in the 1960s, to the religions of the East for what was and is so appallingly lacking in Western religions. The Dalai Lama neatly sums up the Eastern approach when he says, “My religion is kindness.”

The goal of the various religions that fall into this category has been harmony, to overcome oppositional energy by changing the mind, the heart, the emotions. They are less concerned by doctrinal rightness and certainly “the next world” than have been the religions of the West.

The religion of Jesus, though Richard Rohr calls him the first non-dual teacher of the West, was that of mystical Judaism. He used aphorisms, riddles, parables, wisdom sayings and concrete practices like eating with all sorts of people to convey his teachings. This teaching today is a wisdom teaching about opening up, becoming childlike, putting away the things we think give us security and identity. Further, these teachings are much more about practice, spiritual practices, than believing certain ideas to be true or false.

They did not worry about “sin management” which has been the concern of the Western Church since well before the so-called Protestant Reformation. This sin management approach brought into Western consciousness one of the most damaging and useless ideas ever, that of “moral perfection.” It is similar to the notion that there is a “functional family.”

This teaching is about seeing. It is about how we see and who it is that does the seeing.

How we see and who we think we are is affected not only by whether we approach the world and ourselves dualistically or non-dualistically but also by the world-view which we take to be the truth about “what is.”

Basically, there are four world-views.

One is the materialistic world view.

This is the one we are, without choice, immersed in 24/7. The religion of our culture is consumerism. What counts is what can be measured and controlled.

Jesus was clear about not being able to serve two masters. I was shocked when I first heard one of my spiritual teachers say that anyone with this world view is an atheist at the practical level. People with this world view may profess to be religious, even have a “personal relation with Jesus” and see this as “a Christian nation” but it is practical atheism. The God of Jesus has nothing to do with this world view.

The Jesus pictured for us in the Gospel of Thomas teaches resolute refusal to trust in the false securities of dogma, authority or worldly or conventional religious rules of conduct. These things cannot put one onto a path of authenticity where we can surrender to the birth of a reality in us that makes us revolutionary agents of its birth in reality. (You may have to read that sentence a couple of times!)

There is another world-view and it is called “spiritual.” This has usually been called “gnosticism.” In our lifetime it has shown up under the label “new age” or something like that. In this world view all that matters is what you cannot see.

The third world view is the theological/religious world view. Here is where people try to put things back together and cram God back into the world where secularism has edged God out. In the blink of an eye Christmas will be upon us and you’ll see this view manifested as some people will plea “let us put Christ back into Christmas.” This belief holds it that Sacred Mystery must be reintroduced into the material world.

The fourth world view is that of mysticism. I have most frequently referred to this as non-dual mind. In Christianity it is called the “incarnational” world view. This is what is meant when Jesus is referred to as Christ. Some Christians have misused because they misunderstand this world view to make Jesus unique and Christianity exceptional. Whereas Jesus clearly taught that all people, if they would just wake

up to the truth, would see that their true identity is who they/we are in Sacred Mystery. Jesus said that what he taught about himself was true of everyone and was that which had always been true.

The Jesus of Thomas is a revolutionary mystic. He knows that he has discovered and been discovered by a powerful secret; a potentially all-transforming power of love in action.

What is called for from us is a waking up to this fact. This waking up is not a one time event but, rather an on-going process that we have to stay with on a daily basis as we do the work of growing in spiritual intelligence.

One of the marks of the truly spiritually aware individual is that they know that they don't know whereas one of the marks of Western secularism, no matter how much religious lingo it uses to disguise itself, is its disgusting certitude.

My personal experience has been that this "waking up" process is not merely demanding but also is full of anxiety. I think this is one of the main reasons people don't want to do a daily practice that involves sitting in silence.

It is simply hard for us to admit that though we think we see "what is" we do that seeing through a set of prejudices many of which we are absolutely unaware of.

Think of it this way: If you were blind, all the explanation in the world of the color yellow would give you nothing but the explanation of the color yellow. It would not give you the experience of seeing it. In the same manner we are tempted to think that our ideas of God, whatever they might be, are God. That's prejudice. Prejudice is the belief that our ideas about people are the truth about people. The danger of any religion is that it leads its adherents to believe that the doctrine and beliefs of that religion is the real thing. Mystics know better. Jesus was a mystic.

A mystic is one who has gone through a profound transformational experience from which they emerge with a profound sense of oneness with the Sacred. Afterwards, people can sense that there is something different about them. They usually attract followers who want something of what they sense the mystic has.

Here is the rub: Mystical means something hidden, something that cannot be talked about except perhaps in poetry and metaphor.

“I am one with God and so are you.” That is not only powerful but also destructive to the prevailing world view. This is why Jesus said, “If you follow me, if you get your identity from where I do, then your task is to learn to be in the world by not of it.” A challenge.

If you want to know more about this, one resource would be a collection of essays you would use as part of your daily practice. It is called, “What The Mystics Know: Seven Pathways to Your Deeper Self.” This is a book to be absorbed and savored, not devoured.

One of the things I have gotten from my reading of it is that Sacred Mystery, though light and enlightening, can only be accessed by going into the dark. Our culture doesn't encourage this. Jesus teaches the path of descent and the value of poverty. Not our values. The challenge is that of paradox: how do we remain loyal to what is and risk for what needs to be?

To quote Rohr: “This may explain why the people who have met Jesus are humble people. Because they have been overwhelmed by a humble God. A God who is not overwhelming and triumphant, with all the answers and all the perfection, but a God who is somehow in this with us. A God who is infinite, yet somehow finite. Who is in charge, yet chooses not to be in control at all.

My teacher, Robert Johnson, spent three months every year after he became a Jungian in India. Robert is 94 now and his books have sold more than 2.5 million copies. (Read more - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_A._Johnson_\(psychotherapist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_A._Johnson_(psychotherapist))) He said that in India there was no way to avoid the human dilemma through the usual means of mental gymnastics, political posturing or projection of the shadow elsewhere. The dilemma is right there, glaring, obvious, overwhelming and tragic. It is no surprise, he said, that this culture was the crucible that produced both Gandhi and Mother Teresa. This culture, home to the world's oldest religion, had the depth to rediscover the nonviolent teaching of Jesus and the Great Compassion of Sacred Mystery. They didn't look for winners and losers but a way to hold all that is and all who are.

Words became flesh, which is what the early followers of Jesus said about him. I think this is why mystics can forgive, let go, show mercy and love their enemies.

Words are guideposts. Western religion made them into hitching posts.

I don't recall where I got this story: God and Satan are out for a walk one day. As they go along, God spots something in the road and bends down and picks it up. Satan says, "What have you got there?" God holds up what he has picked up and says, "This is Truth." Satan says, "Here. Give it to me. I'll organize it for you." He did. It's called systematic theology.

So what is the practical application of all of this?

Teachings like this are designed to subvert our world view and expose its illusions, especially to us. If we hear a teaching of Jesus and then cram it into our existing world view, it will not have served its purpose. Teachings like this are supposed to worm their way inside us and unlock our operative world view so that we can see and hear reality correctly. Our whole universe has to be rearranged truthfully before individual teachings can be heard correctly.

What the religions of the West have done is to give people moral and doctrinal teaching without rearranging their mythic world view. It clearly does not work. It creates legalists, ritualists, minimalists, and literalists who always kill the spirit of a thing and frequently kill literally.

I want to repeat something I've said in here before. I just wanted you to know that I know I'm repeating it:

The way most of us are in our religious/spiritual practices, if we have them, is like this: We have a list of things we have to do or be or believe and with this in hand we go to the cave where we think God is and we do, are and believe these things in the hope that God will eventually come out of the cave and give us a hug. "Oh there, there. Aren't you cute. I love you so much. You're okay. You're in. Now run along and have a nice life. By the way, if you ever get in trouble or need anything, give me a call."

It's not that way at all. If we don't give up and walk away, we sit down and we calm our minds, we open our heart, our spiritual eyes and ears and we eventually we hear God say, "I'm not coming out. I want you to come in here. Take off your clothes. (That is what we think protects and keeps us safe.) You come in here. By the way, leave your list outside.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.