

Is Jesus undermining the church?

The progressive Christian movement in Australia is made up of people from numerous denominations, although many are from within the Uniting Church in Australia. It is interesting to note that Christians are not alone in having members who are seeking a progressive approach to an understanding of the sacred. There are a number of prominent Jewish Rabbis such as Jonathon Kieren Black and Aviva Kippen who are articulating a progressive approach to Judaism. These are people who have turned their backs on a strict orthodox approach to religion.

So what do these terms mean? Firstly an 'orthodox' approach to religion with a small "o" refers to a 'mainstream, traditional, popular or conformist' attitude to religion. In Christianity these people make up the majority of adherents in both Catholic and Protestant churches. The word 'progressive' refers to people who are 'developing gradually or stage by stage reforms in the development of new religious ideas'. In Christian denominations this group constitutes a minority, but rapidly growing group of believers in both the protestant and Catholic congregations.

There are many reasons why people have become dissatisfied with the orthodox or popular view of religion, but most people who refer to themselves as progressive would say they embrace the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth and that this Jesus reflects a compassionate and loving spirit. They are people who question the relevance of the creeds as statements of a faith for today's world. They also raise doubts about many doctrines, claiming they are not reasoned arguments as evidence for God's presence in our world. What many call a commitment to 'intellectual integrity' may be holding people back from embracing a conformist or traditional approach to faith. In light of our knowledge and experience, how can we embrace miracles such of a resuscitated body, or a virgin birth? If we believe that God is a compassionate spirit then can we accept that he would execute his own son? We may be able to embrace the metaphor, but to believe the literal meaning of many parables is stretching the realms of possibility.

This does not mean that those who hold a progressive viewpoint deny the unique spiritual experiences of others. Most people who call themselves progressive embrace the belief that there is more than 'one road home'. However, they do ask that those who follow a traditional faith accept that their journey, with its questions and doubts, is equally relevant and unique.

Perhaps the most important issue for me is to ask the questions, "is the Jesus of the church the same historical Jesus of Nazareth? Or does the historical Jesus undermine the work and structure of today's orthodox church?"

In Dostoevsky's book "The Brothers Kamarazov" there is the wonderful story of the Grand Inquisitor. In this story Jesus returns to earth during the Spanish Inquisition and goes about healing the sick, he is quickly recognised by the crowd for his good works. As Jesus is passing a Cathedral he is confronted by the funeral procession for a small child and in compassion for the grieving he

raises the child from the dead. The Grand Inquisitor is a witness to this act of love and realises that this is really Jesus who has returned to earth so he immediately has him arrested and thrown into prison.

The Inquisitor then visits Jesus to explain the reason for his arrest and the rest of the story becomes a monologue. The Inquisitor tells Jesus that when he was 'tempted by Satan' he should have yielded to the last temptation and accepted sovereignty over the world. This would have in turn given him the supreme power to change the world. Instead Jesus gives people free will to decide life for themselves. The Inquisitor claims that Jesus has caused people unnecessary anguish because 'free will is really a burden', one that most people cannot handle. In reality people only want to 'follow and obey' and the church provides them with this opportunity. Jesus' return and his way of loving are undermining the church, which is now preparing itself to rule the world. The Church has usurped Caesar and taken up the sword of imperialism and now Jesus is standing in its way. At this point the Inquisitor determines that Jesus will be burnt at the stake on the following day for crimes against the church.

During this monologue Jesus does not speak and at the end of the Inquisitor's speech Jesus walks across the room and kisses him on his "bloodless aged lips". The Inquisitor shudders but goes and opens the cell door and instructs Jesus to leave and never return. Jesus goes out into the 'dark alleyways of the city' where he is now set free and his spirit will continue to roam the world offering compassionate healing whilst questioning those who claim they act in his name.

Has the church assumed a power that is not the way of Jesus? Has the church attempted to use its organisation, creeds and doctrines to assert its power and control? Or do we need to resurrect the Jesus of history? Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, "When religion speaks out of the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion its message becomes meaningless."

In answer to my question, "Is Jesus undermining the church?" the answer is "Yes", particularly where the church sees itself as a seat of power rather than as a source of liberation and empowerment.

There will always be people who want only to obey and follow and have decisions made for them, because the responsibility of free will creates anxiety. There will be people also who are excited about their free will and wish to question and seek new ways of understanding old truths. The decisions we make regarding which spiritual road to take are often based on our understanding of who Jesus really is. Is your Jesus a figure to model your life on or an object of power to be worshipped?

John W H Smith