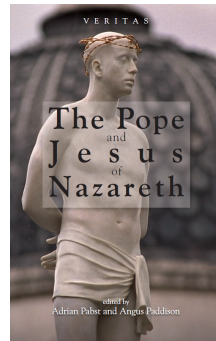


***The Pope and Jesus of Nazareth: Christ, Scripture and the Church*, edited by Adrian Pabst and Angus Paddison**

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This collection of essays is largely drawn from a conference in Nottingham on 19 and 20 June 2008 on the present Pope's much discussed book on the historical Jesus, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*.<sup>1</sup> The present collection, *The Pope and Jesus*



<sup>1</sup>Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (London: Doubleday, 2007).

*of Nazareth*, is a largely appreciative evaluation of what has been deemed by others (e.g. Gerd Lüdemann, Geza Vermes) to be a disappointing and naïve book with little care for any critical scholarship of the past decades.

The Foreword by John Milbank is a combination of a polemic aimed at historical critics and praise for Joseph Ratzinger's alleged brilliance in understanding Jesus. The praise is continued in the introduction by the editors who claim that Ratzinger's "intervention" is a "substantial contribution to contemporary thinking on Jesus," which may be news to those using historical-critical approaches to Jesus, but perhaps not to those, like Ratzinger, who argue for a "false divide between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith" (1). Henri-Jérôme Gagey provides a (very short) history of historical Jesus scholarship and presses the fusion between historical criticism and faith, as does Francisco Javier Martínez, the Archbishop of Granada, in an essay with the telling title of the sort becoming common among those who enjoy queering the Jesus of history/Christ of faith dichotomy, "Christ of History, Jesus of Faith." Fergus Kerr, picking up a central idea in Ratzinger's book, looks at the question of whether Jesus thought he was God and how this sort of self-awareness plays out in relation to philosophical and theological questions. Taking us much deeper into theological territory, Simon Oliver looks at Christ's descent, revelation, creation, divine sustenance, Nicholas of Cusa, and various other things only tangentially related to the historical Jesus (and bookending quotations from Ratzinger's book only emphasises how removed from the topic Oliver seems to get). Peter J. Casarella brings us back to familiar territory and shows how Ratzinger's personal search for the face of the Lord informs his analysis. Purportedly, rather than abandoning reason, this "biblical reference actually demonstrates that the theological acumen of the theologian Joseph Ratzinger has thereby reached its zenith" (83–84). In contrast to *Facebook* and other highly sophisticated instruments for social networking which permeate the lives of students, they report that in Ratzinger's work they encounter a "broad-minded compass of cross-cultural images and judicious sifting of decades of Jesus research" (92–93).

R. W. L. Moberly looks at Ratzinger's study of Deut 18:15 and 34:10 and how Christ fulfils Israel's hopes and reflects on issues surrounding Christianised readings of the Old Testament. Though not uncritical, Moberly detects an "outstanding scholarly mind" in Ratzinger's book as well as Ratzinger's "mastery of the disciplines of biblical and theological scholarship" (97). Richard B. Hays critiques Ratzinger's use of historical-critical scholarship and suggests how improvements can be made on more theologically

minded approaches to history. While hardly uncritical, Hays still thinks Ratzinger's book "demands, and repays, careful attention" (109). Markus Bockmuehl's article on the ways in which later performative exegesis and receptions can provide insights is neatly summarised in its title, "Saints' Lives as Exegesis" and is one of the more nuanced essays in the book. Like Hays, Bockmuehl is less misty-eyed about Ratzinger's use of historical Jesus scholarship and the general problems with Ratzinger's book. Olivier-Thomas Venard builds on Ratzinger's high Christological reading by arguing, with detailed exegesis, that John 1:1–18 is "extraordinarily" coherent (155) with Matt 12:46–13:58. Richard Bell uses concepts of "myth" to bring history and theology together with particular reference to the Transfiguration. Angus Paddison's essay injects more scepticism into uses of historical criticism while turning to the Church and faith to develop the role of the "implied exegete" or a "hermeneutic of discipleship."

Roland Deines provides a critique of "secular" approaches to history and to Ratzinger's book and advocates the bringing together of historical criticism and faith in New Testament scholarship, including the idea that the historical Jesus is God acting in history. Adele Reinhartz analyses the problems involved in Ratzinger's portrayal of Judaism, including his discussions with Jacob Neusner, and how Ratzinger unintentionally ends up reinforcing anti-Jewish stereotypes and supersessionism. Mona Siddiqui looks at the different Christian approaches to Jewish scriptures and the Qur'ān and the differences between Christian and Muslim conceptions of God, including Ratzinger's quest for the face of God. Finally, George Dennis O'Brien raises some critical questions concerning Ratzinger's book and even the idea that it might not be relevant for our times.

It is hoped that this reviewer is not the only one who wonders how Ratzinger's naïve and massively outdated book on the historical Jesus can too often be elevated to such a high status and how certain contributors believe that overtly reading orthodox Christian theology into the historical Jesus is somehow intellectually sophisticated, refreshing or innovative (or, indeed, accurate). The worst offender is Milbank who shows absolutely no awareness of the historical-critical scholarship he is so dedicated to undermining. We are told that the Pope is apparently convincing when he fights scholarly scepticism whose dismissal of historicity is on (unspecified) "feeble grounds." A "lack of Christian faith" has, like a moody teenager it would seem, "issues," which account for the "implausible denial of much continuity between Jesus' own teachings and later Christian belief." "Nearly all 'biblical critics'

seem constitutionally incapable” of “any objective literary reading of the New Testament” because this “objective literary reading” shows “the exact opposite—a tremendous, if complex and accelerating, *continuum*” (xxvii). More directly quoted material could be given but one result would be consistent: no scholar is mentioned as performing such purportedly bad practice.

We could defend Milbank and accept that the genre of the Foreword is not the place for detailed bibliographical referencing; although a little fidelity to what is actually happening in New Testament scholarship might be expected from a theology professor. For as it happens, plenty of New Testament scholars (rightly or wrongly) see the continuities between Jesus and what followed, not least in a time when conservative scholarship has enjoyed several years in the ascendancy. However, instead of citing external scholarship, we might instead turn to scholars in the very volume for which Milbank provides the Foreword. According to Roland Deines, with scholarly references in a footnote, “For this position he [Ratzinger] could have drawn on a number of reputable scholarly positions which acknowledge even on the basis of the Synoptics and their rigorous historical-critical evaluation that Jesus acted in such a way and with an authority that linked him very closely to God” (206). To make matters more puzzling, Milbank praises Olivier-Thomas Venard’s “brilliant and refreshingly accurate exegesis in this volume—when he shows that lack of Christian faith has issued in an implausible denial of much continuity between Jesus’ own teachings and later Christian belief” (xxvii). Yet Venard argues that an “early high Christology unifying diverse traditions about Jesus appears ever more plausible to historians of early Christianity” (136), hardly implying constitutional incapability. More generally, the contributions by Markus Bockmuehl and Richard Hays are perfectly aware of the historical-critical problems in the Pope’s book. It is clear, then, that Milbank’s polemic is empty and at times is, at least in his representation of scholarship, closer to Hal Lindsey’s attack in *Late Great Planet Earth* on stupid liberal professors who do not believe in the historicity of the Daniel stories than he is to several of the contributors to this volume.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 91: “If you are a careful Bible student you know the common sport in the classroom today, especially in courses called ‘The Bible as Literature,’ or something similar. Teachers love to tear the Book of Daniel apart—they especially like to late-date it. Some liberal professors claim that it was written in 165 B.C., in order to discredit the supernatural element of prophecy. However, the authenticity of Daniel and its early date has been carefully defended by such scholars as Dr Merril F. Unger, Dr E. J. Young, and Sir Robert Anderson.”

Maybe it is no surprise that Ratzinger's book has found enthusiastic endorsement from Denver Theological Seminary and related American conservative evangelical circles (see Bockmuehl, 121).

Ordinarily it may be unfair to dwell on the Foreword, but this book is explicitly a product of the Centre of Theology and Philosophy (ix; and the *Veritas* series as a whole), from where Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy cast a long shadow, and of which several contributors can count themselves as Fellows, Honorary Fellows or Members (e.g. Milbank, Pabst, Oliver, Kerr, Martínez). In contributions more closely related to the Centre and to Radical Orthodoxy at least, the prioritising, or at least open advocating, of faith-based approaches is therefore not unexpected, as we have already seen in Milbank's swipe at "lack of Christian faith." This is not a book that has too much difficulty with the circular reasoning involved in accepting truth in advance. Less polemically, Angus Paddison talks of "the conviction that the practices involved in following Jesus are inseparable from scriptural reading" and as such "disciples enjoy an interpretative privilege because they participate in the world which Scripture wills to make known.... It is not that a hermeneutic of discipleship regards itself as antithetical to the interests of the modern university. What it does do is calmly point out the hermeneutical priority and advantage of Scripture's 'implied exegete'" (176–177). It is always worth playing around with such approaches by using extremes. In what sense would Stalinists or fascists enjoy an interpretative privilege, hermeneutical priority and advantage when studying the words of the two dictators over the historically-minded critical scholar of Stalin or Hitler? What this move does—more subtly with Paddison than Milbank—is to develop the kind of Christian imperialism which is becoming so prominent in Radical Orthodoxy circles. This is notably the case with Pabst, Milbank and his protégé, the Red Tory Phillip Blond, all of whom have been producing some ill-thought-out and historically-naïve assessments of Islam while extolling the wonders of some kind of benign Christian imperialism which will help us all, Muslims included.<sup>3</sup> Of course, with Milbank and those he has influenced (several of whom are contributors and one a co-editor) this probably means a certain kind of Christian, hence Milbank's inaccurate attack on a

<sup>3</sup>L. Felipe Pondé, "Appendix: An Interview with John Milbank and Conor Cunningham," in *Belief and Metaphysics*, ed. Conor Cunningham and Peter M. Candler (London: SCM, 2007), 501–527 (505–508); Philip Blond and Adrian Pabst, "Integrating Islam into the West," *New York Times*, November 4, 2008; see also John Milbank, "Christianity, the Enlightenment and Islam," *ABC Religion and Ethics*, August 24, 2010, <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2010/08/24/2991778.htm>.

“lack of Christian faith” having “issues” with an “implausible denial of much continuity between Jesus’ own teachings and later Christian belief.” Famous scholars from Bultmann through Dunn to Allison were and are openly Christian (and the discipline is hardly dominated by atheists!); so does the more they stress discontinuity mean the less Christian they get?

An overtly Christian take on the world, typically at the expense of socio-economic explanations (at least in any serious detail), is common to both Ratzinger and Milbank/Radical Orthodoxy, despite token references. Indeed, Ratzinger’s book is the book which gave us the following analysis of poverty: “The aid offered by the West to developing countries has been purely technically and materially based, and not only left God out of the picture, but has driven men away from God. And this aid ... is what first turned the ‘third world’ into what we mean today by that term.... The issue is the primacy of God. The issue is acknowledging that he is a reality, that he is the reality without which nothing else can be good. History cannot be detached from God and then run smoothly on purely material lines.”<sup>4</sup> Western aid has indeed been a problem, but Ratzinger’s replacement model is hardly the sort of trenchant socio-economic analysis required when dealing with issues of global injustice. But then this privileging of theological and supernatural explanation is precisely the model which dominates the thinking underlying much of *The Pope and Jesus of Nazareth* and Milbank-influenced Radical Orthodoxy. Milbank, as ever, sets the tone we have seen elsewhere. He claims on behalf of Ratzinger, “So the Pope concludes that, without the hypothesis of Jesus’ messianic and God-consciousness (true or deluded), the irruption of the Church into history becomes harder to explain. Furthermore, he implies, the nature of the influence exerted by Jesus and the historical effects to which he gave rise render the notion that he was deluded perhaps, as C. S. Lewis again suggested, somewhat implausible ... if Jesus was deluded, there would somehow be an incongruous mismatch between such a capacity for self-deceit and the sheer grandeur and enormity of his self-presentation” (xxviii). Milbank’s perpetuation of the Pope’s outdated view has to ignore any number of alternative explanations of Christian origins and push the Great Man (or, indeed, God) view of history. And polemically rejecting unnamed scholarship or citing C. S. Lewis’ long-outdated views on Jesus do not count.

To be fair to the editors, *The Pope and Jesus of Nazareth* does contain some dissent and difference, even if not at the level that might be expected of an underwhelming book by the Pope. In terms of religious identity issues, there

<sup>4</sup>Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 33–34.

are the contributions particularly relating to Judaism and Islam, the latter receiving the token amount of space Pabst and Blond would give to Muslims in a Christianised Europe.<sup>5</sup> It is worth pointing out that the contributions of Reinhartz and Siddiqui are the only ones lumped together in Pabst and Paddison's introduction, noting "their perspectives ... as Jewish and Islamic scholars" (7). Milbank, who is rapidly turning himself into the embodiment of everything Edward Said demolished,<sup>6</sup> argues in one of his more moderate recent outbursts that there is still cause to be nervous because there is, apparently, "the danger of mainstream Sunni Islamic positivism and voluntarism ... which arguably, perhaps, helped, by concealed influence, to corrupt later Western medieval biblical exegesis, participatory ontology, eschatology and political theory" (xxviii). Perhaps inadvertently protecting us (temporarily) from Milbank and Pabst on Islam, the Pope has more to say about Judaism, not least in his love of the work of Jacob Neusner. For those who have not read Ratzinger's book I do not think I am giving too much away when I tell you that, for all its praise, Judaism still comes out a poor second to Christianity. This point is recognised in Adele Reinhartz's contribution, where she clearly shows that discussions in the Pope's book "begin by acknowledging and voicing criticism of anti-Jewish readings of the passage at hand, but they end with a subtle, and, I believe, unintentional reinforcement of the stereotypes that underlie the anti-Jewish readings themselves" (238; cf. also Hays, 116, on Ratzinger avoiding the tricky issues of anti-Jewish readings of John's Gospel). But this sort of critique of the Pope is hardly sustained throughout *The Pope and Jesus of Nazareth* and the book would have been greatly improved if it had more ideological, cultural and historical contextualisation of the Pope's book, rather than constant theological appreciation and, at times, saccharine adoration.

It could be added that despite the Radical Orthodox influences clearly running throughout *The Pope and Jesus of Nazareth*, there are useful discussions of theology and biblical studies (including the reception of the Bible), particularly from those less associated with Radical Orthodoxy. Clearly and unsurprisingly, this book will appeal most to those of a certain pious disposition. But there remains one question this reviewer cannot shake off: why has anyone taken the Pope's book on Jesus remotely seriously? Obviously

<sup>5</sup>Blond and Pabst, "Integrating Islam into the West."

<sup>6</sup>Deane Galbraith, "John Milbank's Atavistic Orthodoxy," *Religion Bulletin*, September 6, 2010, <http://www.equinoxjournals.com/blog/2010/09/john-milbanks-atavistic-orthodoxy>.

the fame of the Pope plays a big part and it is obviously something to be studied as part of reception history and as such can be taken seriously as any subject. But as a work of historical criticism? Really? And, despite some of the more over-the-top claims made in *The Pope and Jesus of Nazareth*, even the blurring of the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith is hardly news in historical-critical circles, where such battles are fought endlessly. Consequently, anyone with interest in historical criticism will learn little new or, in the case of Milbank's piece, even find unhelpful information. Its main contribution to scholarship will probably be those essays engaging with the theological interpretation of scripture.

Then again we should not be too surprised that there is a general attempt to cosy up to the work of such a powerful man at the head of a powerful institution. After all, Milbank, Blond (immortalised as Mister Bollocks by the political cartoonist Steve Bell<sup>7</sup>) and the whole Red Tory project so intimately related to Radical Orthodoxy try to oppose neoliberalism and liberalism by presenting themselves as useful idiots for the most neoliberal government in British history, headed by the neoliberal Conservative Party in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, promoting an overtly neoliberal approach to higher education and British society in general—although Blond and Milbank somehow still seem to believe otherwise. The drive to place Radical Orthodoxy at the heart of power, whether spiritual or temporal, and no matter how misleading and disturbing this may be, is never too far from the surface in several recent manifestations of Radical Orthodoxy and their own peculiar brand of imperialism. And rather than influencing power, all this provides a convenient mask for contemporary reassertions of power. To put it mildly, neither the papacy nor the Conservative Party is without uncomfortable recent histories. Taking Ratzinger's book so seriously and generally avoiding its ideological and historical problems contributes to this masking in its own small way and provides further insight into the agenda of Radical Orthodoxy and its deluded dreams of power.

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<sup>7</sup>Steve Bell, "Hi! I'm Mister Cheerful! Who are you?" *The Guardian*, October 4, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cartoon/2010/oct/04/steve-bell-if-conservative-conference>; Steve Bell, "Meet Mr Pignose," *The Guardian*, October 5, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cartoon/2010/oct/05/steve-bell-conservative-conference>.