

***The Existential Jesus* by John Carroll: a review and reminiscence by Drew Hanlon**

This is not an unbiased review as it reflects an especially exciting time intellectually and spiritually, the intensity of which was revived as I read this challenging and important work. Not too many years ago I had the privilege of doing some post-graduate work at La Trobe University. Through this course, and the time it allowed me to do some research, I had the good fortune to be invited to a bible study course in the sociology department. There were some fascinating people involved from various fields, including differing fields of sociology, along with an English professor and those from other fields of study. The bible study was convened by John Carroll, who, as he would state himself, is not a practising Christian but is “someone with a deep intuition of a sacred order governing the human condition; and as someone for whom Jesus is a central but obscure presence” (p.5). As a consequence of these factors, there was a capacity for the group to approach the texts in a way that was not as heavily weighed down with ecclesiastical and theological presuppositions as many bible studies are. This helped bring a new light and appreciation to the texts.

Carroll is one of those growing numbers of people for whom the metaphysics of orthodoxy have failed to have an impact on their lives, not least because “the Christian churches have comprehensively failed in their one central task – to retell their foundation story in a way that might speak to the times”. If I interpret him correctly, it is because the theistic model of God, which was so quickly applied as being the means of understanding the Jesus narrative which emerged in the pre-modern world, fails to translate the immediacy of this story in this post-modern world. That is not to say that Carroll is arguing for an atheistic response to this story either. Rather, he is arguing that the *pneuma*, the spirit that Jesus responds to, is at the core of his being, indeed at the core of every human being. This is Jesus’ experience of *I am*. In the crucifixion, we see the death of the theistic God. This is Jesus’ truth and his tragedy. While the theistic model of God was one of the great achievements of the capacity of those bearing the mental-rational consciousness, Carroll implicitly highlights that this model of God no longer serves us well psychologically and spiritually.

While I experience the book to be constrained, at times, by the limitations of this same mode of rational consciousness, it sets up intriguing, insightful, difficult and vital ideas that the Christian churches must face if we are to have a holistic re-imagining of the creative and redemptive aspects of the whole narrative. This need for theological re-envisioning was powerfully stated by Dennis

Nineham some thirty years ago: "It is at the level of imagination that contemporary Christianity is most weak. Men [sic] find it hard to believe in God because they do not have available to them any lively imaginative picture of the way a God and the world as they know it are related. What they need most is story, a picture, a myth, that will capture their imagination". Carroll is doing this here with the most central figure in Christianity. However, it is arguable that we have not come far in the church when books such as Carroll's are unlikely to be recommended by our church hierarchies. Carroll's work highlights the possibility of the many ways that the Christian church continues to see modernism – let alone post-modernism – as a threat. That is, we get too caught up on the importance of the need for the objective truth of doctrine, while suppressing the poetic power for the imagination that the mythic stories bear. At the same time, books such as this are becoming popular as people reach out for spiritual food while not being interested in crossing the vast chasm between intellect and soul that the church seems to require much of the time. As Carroll highlights forcefully and in some ways brutally, the image of the "church Jesus is a wooden residue of tired doctrine".

One of the fascinating things about this bible study was that each of the participants came to the study with a deep desire for truth in its broadest possible sense, no matter the consequences for how we interpreted or understood the text. With the variety of personalities and differing approaches to the text there were moments of tension, but the main experience was one in which the scriptures were explored from different eyes and assumptions that revealed the texts' rich texturing that can sometimes not be there in formal Christian studies, because people are afraid to ask a difficult question or explore a path of thought that is not necessarily conventional, for fear of being a cause of upset or – just as bad – being set upon by overly defensive Christians who don't like their assumptions being explored. This was certainly not a concern in this group. Personally, this was enriching.

As Carroll expositis in this book, the group took on a profound life of its own. "From early on, a sense grew of us entering a tightly closed and shadowy place in which the atmosphere pulsed with a strange charge.... Everyone instinctively knew that, for all the other members, themes reverberated through the intervening days, waiting to be taken up at the next meeting. Sessions regularly ended in perplexed euphoria.... A journey undertaken together had, in some elusive manner, changed lives" (p.5).

The primary experience of the group was one in which the texts took on a life of their own. Most notably, the book that struck us most profoundly was the gospel of Mark. As intimated by Carroll, sessions were full of unfinished questions. However, our experience was that we were surprisingly full of ineffable possibilities presented to us by the text, an experience so rarely felt in churchy bible studies. So this figure of Jesus presented in Mark gripped the travellers in this group and continues to have Carroll enthralled, hence this book. The reader will be faced with many questions about the nature of Jesus as he is presented in the church: why does he still capture our imaginations? what is the nature of God presented in the gospel of Mark, with its brutal and stark intensity, and its companion piece of sophisticated intensity, the gospel of John? According to Carroll, the figure of Jesus does not capture our imaginations because he represents, manifests or articulates some abstract philosophy (p.4). Rather, for Carroll, regarding Jesus, “the West has one supreme teacher on being. Only one has fathomed its depths” (p.4). Instead, as Carroll suggests, the narrative of Jesus compels us to walk in his shoes and experience what he experiences and learns. As I have suggested this will lead us to a radically different place in our consciousness and experience of the nature of the divine, but we will return to this shortly.

I agree with Carroll when he says that, for many biblical commentators, their doctrinal blinkers stop them from reading the text as it might be. However, of course, the text emerges out of the context of the believing community which must not be forgotten in this multi-voiced experience of the narrative. The important point that Carroll invites his readers to experience is the possibility that the narrative can have a power outside of its pre-determined goals (for example doctrine) and that it may enable us to hear the text afresh, instead of with overly-wax-filled ears that are shaped by the noises of predominantly impotent orthodoxy and moralism.

“It is within the mystery of the narrative that Truth resides”, says Carroll (p.4). In some ways this is an existential response but as I have already hinted at, this may result in a revolution for us psychically, emotionally and spiritually as well as for theology. The Truth of the text is multi-valent and yet concretely experienced in the here and now if we dare to allow it to touch us deeply. Carroll and his fellow explorers experience that the narrative itself takes on a life of its own when it is free from some of the predetermined doctrinal constraints, and Carroll invites his readers into this

experience. Through this narrative of the unfolding (undoing) of his being we see the Truth of He and We and I.

By contrast to non-realist theologians, Carroll is not interested in redemptive illusion – that is, the idea that our religious constructions and experiences are bound up in no referential reality. This is where Carroll breaks ground away from such thinkers. For Carroll, this is where the narrative of Jesus works because it taps into the continuing existential questions that the truth of myth points us to. This is not simply a flatland reality of reductionism, but rather an invitation into the movement of spirit in our lives, touching us in the depths of our beings, and inviting us into the risk of knowing our truest sense of self. However, where Carroll argues that “truth is mythos”, he then goes on to say that:

Mythos, however, is not concerned with the historical Jesus – what this man actually did and said in Palestine around the year 30AD. It happens, of course, that we know virtually nothing about him. The only point worth making here is a negative one: if it could be categorically proved that Jesus never lived, there would be a problem for the story. [This pivotal story is] not based on historical evidence, yet it depends on some belief that the character lived and that the events happened. (15)

Having said that truth is mythos, it is hard to see why there is the need to assert that the Jesus story stands or falls in its existential power because of the historical veracity of a living human being called Jesus around 30 AD. The story of Jesus is so full of existential power because it is an archetypal story that shows us the beauty and terror of living in communion with the Ground and Flow of all Being. Jesus is significant, not least because he is not an abstract philosopher, but rather focuses on being by living in and out of his *I am* (p.4). The story is dripping with shared power and wonder, calling us to participate as disciples. Its story has been replicated by many saints, known and unknown; in one way it matters little if Jesus ever existed. This story is not reliant on there being a historical reality to the person of Jesus; it works because the story is about the truth of spirit and the need to be authentic, truthful and faithful to this reality. The story shows that this is a long and lonely path that can be extremely dangerous. The story reminds us that we are likely to be rejected or misunderstood. Carroll's Jesus shows us that the reality of spirit is that it is immediate accessibility with concomitant responsibility.

According to Carroll, the narrative requires us to wrestle with it time and again as we struggle to discover our truest self. "It is as if this story's method is to possess the reader through its characters, in order to provide a range of mirrors back on the viewing I." (p14) Indeed this story requires our response: either we are lovers of *pneuma* or we are consumed by a sense of dread and fear of spirit – *pneumaphobia* (p.35). This is a fundamental key to Carroll's reading of the text. He does not mean some intellectual or objectified deity but rather the very spirit of being itself. This, according to Carroll, is Mark's story of his experience of Jesus, and he invites the reader into a similar experience.

In one sense there are similarities in Carroll's work with such diverse figures as Meister Eckhart, John A.T. Robinson, Paul Tillich and mystical, post-theistic theologians and thinkers, not least, in an Australian context, David Tacey. For such people, God is beyond an object among other objects – God is the very essence and manifestation of being, while also being pure formless emptiness. Hence it might be argued that when confronted with an exclusivist claim such as John 14:6 they see this as an existential demand to take up Jesus' journey of truth to Being and Becoming and that in this way one has an intimate relationship with what Carroll calls spirit.

We would be wise to make sure that we do not have a reductionist understanding of spirit if we wish to be grasped by a grand narrative, lest it be too anthropocentric. Such reductionism is a danger for a prophet of the spirit in any particular time and place, and Carroll comes very close to this point a number of times. Carroll's understanding that "God is replaced by the man whose story is about to told" and, "John in his opening chapter, will likewise make it clear that Jesus replaces God" (p.24) is to make a similar mistake to that of the most extreme Death of God theologians in the 1960s. Where some of the Death of God theologians, following Barth's extreme Word made Flesh theology, saw that God died in Jesus, Carroll does not make it sufficiently clear that in the Jesus story there is a radical shift in the story of humanity and God, rather than the elimination of God altogether. I do not believe that it is the intention of the writers of Mark and John to replace God, but rather, as Carroll does, to show us that Jesus is true to spirit in word and deed and that this has significant consequences. Living out the reality of spirit will at times brings out the pneumaphobia of others. This spirit permeates our being, and so for Jesus, as Carroll suggests, in some sense in Gethsemane, "he is living *being*. In Gethsemane, that is not enough." (p.113)

In this context Carroll is essentially showing us that since Freud, Feuerbach and Nietzsche, along with other orators of suspicion, with the consequential spiritual ennui alongside and emerging out of the horrors of World War 1, the Holocaust and all the known and unknown atrocities of the twentieth century, the God of omnipotence is nothing but a superficial desire, a long lost reality of security and the refusal of the individual to “be”, a reality that Jesus experienced two thousand years ago. However, a possible implication of Carroll’s work is that spirit is enmeshed, immersed and unfolding with humanity and potentially all of creation. However, in the light of Gethsemane and Golgotha the desire to say “yes” to life may have terrible consequences for the individual.

For Carroll, this capacity to say yes to life and to spirit is the heart of Mark’s gospel. It is the lens through which he interprets and re-interprets the stories and the narrative as a whole. Often, particularly in the first five chapters, this provides contentious, surprising insights into the narrative. Carroll takes us into new ways of reading the text and letting the text read us. This is both a great strength to this book and its weakness. A bit like Bishop Spong, (most obviously in his book *Resurrection: Myth or Reality*) Carroll deconstructs what he believes are the false constructions of the church. This can reveal a wonderful array of new images and insights, but the writer must also be aware of his own constructions. This comes through when Carroll explores the meaning of the empty tomb and in particular the young man robed in white.

Carroll constructs an argument that this man is the same man who is earlier described as *Legion*, and who was the young man who fled naked in Gethsemane. For Carroll, this is the same man who is the ultimate insider, who appreciates the *mystery* or the great *I am* of the Jesus story. Indeed this story, according to Carroll, is told first hand; this young man is Mark; “...the narrator appearing in person inside the tomb to address the reader directly.... The story teller is as significant as the Master, although his role is clearly different....The life of that ordinary individual, here and now, has become possessed by the Story....The Story is *his* existential journey” (p.133-4.)

This is an interesting construction that does make for a potentially transformative reading of the text. However, to a certain degree, it does not show the significance of the context of the probable community that this text was written for. It is likely that this gospel was written for a community that was in trouble, in which discipleship had become an issue, almost to the point of defining who was or was not a Christian. This is no small issue in a hostile and sometimes deadly environment.

Carroll argues that most scholars would agree that “[Mark] quite likely wrote down his narrative later, after a long period of digesting what he knew” (p.131). But there are three persons that are involved here: the Master, the Writer, and the community that the Writer was writing for. Carroll suggests this when he states that “from the outset it has been the reader to whom the teaching monologue has been directed, not the twelve (p.133).” To reduce the gospel of Mark to an existential story is possibly to be in danger of doing exactly what Carroll critiques: to be fearful of spirit. The story works not simply because it is an existential story, although it is that. The story works because it reveals the risk of humanity participating in non-dual spirit, sharing in this power, making it plain.

The narrative of Jesus suggests that spirit is at the heart of the universe, at the heart of ourselves. What dies in the course of this narrative is the ability for us to rely on any external projection. The spirit of evolution is that power that is at the heart of Jesus’ ‘yes’ to life, his willingness for intimacy with this power to be *I am*. It is the intimate, transformative and universal spirit that Jesus makes plain. Rather than the Death of God, what is revealed is the non-dual experience of the divine that is concretely experienced. This lack of differentiation is often not done in the church and in some other forms of spiritual reconstruction. For me, Carroll’s work takes a more reductionist position that implicitly or explicitly stops it from being a more integral work and therefore all that it could be. He successfully shows that the narrative can be interpreted as revealing the impotence of an unconsciously chosen abstract image of God but to a certain extent does not allow the text to speak fully about the non-dual experience of the divine that so many of the great spiritual teachers encourage us to explore in our individual and collective lives.

As with most books of such a polemical nature there is an extreme position that is taken in order to set up an argument that needs a counterbalance. Nevertheless, this is an exciting, inventive and engaging title that presents a fresh interpretation on this great integral incarnate mythic narrative of Western culture. This book reminds us that when we say yes to spirit, what can be felt is the transformative power of being along with the possibility of being walking expressions of *I am*. Carroll’s book suggests that the profound and dangerous reality of *I am* can be experienced in the incarnation of spirit, that is already fully present, when we wake-up and we dare to be authentic to *pneuma* that is at the core of our lives. This is no domesticated Jesus that bobs up in self-reassuring bible studies. This is an image of Jesus that challenges overtly pious self-satisfaction that rests on

dogmatic reassurances that pervades the thinking of some purveyors of various forms of orthodoxy, or the inconsequential presence of Jesus in some forms of liberalism. This is a book that reminds us that so much of what we take for granted, for better and for worse, rests on our Christian origins. More importantly, to read Carroll's book is to turn to the face of Jesus once again and see him anew, in his frightening fury, passionate embrace of life, his love and despair, his faith and weariness, and see that his face is not that different from ours, and yet he has embraced and manifested spirit in a way that has changed our world.