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## The Beginning of Historical Research on Jesus in the Modern Age

### *1. New Understandings of the Historical Figure of Jesus in Modern Age*

It is generally affirmed that the history of the research on the historical Jesus begins with H.S. Reimarus on the influence of Deism and Enlightenment (an idea that rests on a book published more than a century ago by A. Schweitzer<sup>1</sup>) and that is characterized by a series of phases or stages that culminate in the “last quest”. The aim of these pages is to present a critique of both these opinions. In fact, the tentative to reconstruct an image of Jesus independently from the theological interpretations of the Churches is already attested at the beginnings of the fifteenth century. Secondly, the history of the research must be understood not in the frame of a linear historical evolution that proceeds by subsequent phases, but in the light of a social history that takes into considerations the constant conflicting attitudes of different coexisting intellectual and academic institutions of Modern Age: Catholic theological Faculties, Protestant theological Faculties, and independent academic institutions and scholars.

The first condition that made it possible a new historical research on Jesus was humanism which emphasized reading texts in the original language and which, starting at the beginning of the fourteenth century, influenced biblical research by bringing in a new understanding of early Christian concepts (for example *metanoia* versus *poenitentia*) in light of the Jewish and Greek cultures in which they were produced. The critique of medieval theology and the rise of a method of philological and historical analysis are two dialectic movements that are inseparable from humanism and contribute to the creation of the possibility of a new historical research on Jesus based on the direct reading of the original texts of the Gospels, independently from theological presuppositions.

A second contributing factor was the Protestant idea of the discontinuity between medieval theology and Christian origins or, better, the Word of God. According to the Reformers, everything in the ecclesiastic tradition (dogmatic theology and ecclesiastic institutions) that was not faithful to the Word of God as passed down in the New Testament had to be submitted to criticism. This principle of discontinuity constituted a powerful drive towards the quest for the authentic portrait of Jesus, quite aside from later theological representations. For the Catholic theology emerging from the Council of Trent, by contrast, Sacred Scripture had to be understood within the interpretation offered by the Catholic Church and the “unanimous consent of the Fathers.” This set up an opposition between the Catholic principle of continuity of Tradition and the Protestant idea of the transcendence of the Word of God over the Church. The principle of continuity therefore triggered a catholic tendency to produce historical representations of Jesus that had to be in harmony with Catholic theology. In the case, for example of C. Baronius’ *Annales Ecclesiastici*, the historical

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<sup>1</sup> *From Reimarus zu Wrede. Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1906).

reconstruction of the life of Christ was directly in conflict with a Protestant representation, and this conflict will have continued for centuries.

A third factor was the increasing awareness of the existence of new religions, following the discovery of the Americas and the subsequent colonial conquests. From the fifteenth century on, European thought was marked by a strong comparative urge that would eventually lead, in the seventeenth century, to the birth of a new science, the comparative history of religions.<sup>3</sup> In this context, the need arose to position the religious figure of Jesus within a comparative religious framework. Questions about the historical Jesus responded to this intellectual trend, as we will see for example in the case of Pietro Pomponazzi.

The fourth factor is represented by the conflicts and wars of religions that pervaded Europe from the early sixteenth century until the middle of the seventeenth century. Within such a climate, there arose a historical exegesis of biblical texts and a new historical vision of Jesus, aside from the irreconcilable contrasts among churches. Since the conflicting dogmatic theologies could not find an agreement about the principal constitutive elements of Christianity, only an historical exegesis independent from confessional presuppositions could pretend to reconstruct an image of early Christianity and Jesus that could be acceptable within the “*république des lettres*”. An example is Jean Leclerc’s *Historia Jesu Christi* (1699), written on the basis of his synopsis of the four gospels.

A fifth factor was the birth of modern science, which brought in its wake a crisis of the traditional worldview consecrated by ancient and medieval Christianity. Year after year, during all modern age, beginning at least from the end of fifteenth century, modern science trounced traditional knowledge, replacing the ancient conceptions of astronomy, geology, medicine, and the natural sciences in general, with new knowledge that necessarily challenged the philosophical and scientific presuppositions of theological conceptions. Historical Jesus research was a part of this trend, as is demonstrated for example by the christological implications of the so-call second process against G.Galilei, in 1632-33.<sup>5</sup>

Sixth, from the sixteenth century on, as is demonstrated by Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and Baruch Spinoza’s *Theological-political Treatise*, political reflection assumed a role that was crucial to renewing the interpretation of Christianity, sacred scriptures, Jesus’ political vision, and the political function of the churches. It is in this context that the idea of the eschatological nature of Jesus’ announce of the kingdom of God began to be at the center of the attention, long before the end of nineteenth century and the book of J.Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reich Gottes*.

A final factor —perhaps one of the most important—was the impact of the presence of a Jewish scholarship in the European cultural milieu, which imposed the need for a Jewish reading of the Bible and a Jewish interpretation of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> This presence begins already at the end of fifteenth century with Isaac of Troki’s *Chizzuk Imunah* and with Leone Modena in the sixteenth century.

These factors cannot be isolated one from another and constitute the complex cultural and scientific background in which new understandings of the figure of Jesus began to come to the surface. For three hundred years, long before S.Reimarus’ seventh fragment, the discussion about the historical figure of Jesus together with the search about Christian origins was at the center of the interest of many European intellectuals and scholars. In the following pages I will limit myself to indicate only some particularly innovating works.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> M. Pesce, *L’ermeneutica biblica di Galileo e le due strade della teologia cristiana*, (Roma: Storia e Letteratura, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Trude Weis-Rosmarin, *Jewish Expressions on Jesus*, (New York: Ktav, 1976); C. Facchini, *Religione, scienza e storia in un rabbino tra Sei e Settecento. Yisshaq Hayyim Cantarini* (Bologna: Baiesi, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed bibliographical information see M.Pesce, “Per una ricerca storica su Gesù nei secoli XVI-XVIII: prima di Hermann S.Reimarus”, *Annali di Storia dell’esegesi* 28 (2011), 433-464; “Illuminismo” inteso come negazione della fede dogmatica, categoria applicabile alla ricerca sul Gesù storico?, *Annali di Storia dell’Esegesi* 29 (2012), 171-189.

## 2. The Naturalist Interpretation of Jesus (Pietro Pomponazzi, Giordano Bruno)

Pietro Pomponazzi, in his *Apologia*<sup>8</sup> and in *De Incantationibus* (1517),<sup>9</sup> presents a naturalistic interpretation of the birth of religions. He argues that every time situations of crisis arise, a cosmic influence is the natural cause that gives birth to prophets or founders of religions. These figures (called *divini* or *perfecti homines*) are able to receive and transmit the natural influence of the cosmic celestial bodies. Pomponazzi does not deny the superiority of Jesus in relation to other prophets nor his divinity. He creates, however, a conceptual classification in which Jesus is included. Christianity is seen as a natural phenomenon and the reason for its birth is understood within a general explanation that can be applied to all religions. In this sense Pomponazzi anticipates a historical-religious understanding of Jesus and Christianity.

The naturalist interpretation is attested many times in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. After the rediscovery of many Roman-Hellenistic works (first of all the *Corpus Hermeticum*), Renaissance culture had very positive evaluation of ancient magics. Magical conceptions and rituals were not only studied but also in some ways practiced. For Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), as for other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thinkers, the new concept of nature implied a major general mutation in the interpretation of phenomena – like miracles - previously attributed to supernatural causes.<sup>10</sup> In Bruno's work, the figure of Jesus is mainly perceived through the concept of magic.<sup>12</sup> Jesus was a magician. He was able to perform miracles, because of his knowledge of the laws of the nature and of magical rituals. In other words, Bruno attempted an *ante litteram* historical-religious location of Jesus. Another important aspect of Bruno's contribution is his negative evaluation of Jesus and Christianity. This is an extraordinarily relevant fact because is one of the first cases in which a critical attitude towards Jesus comes to the surface in Europe, an attitude that will prevail in other sectors of the intellectual society of the time.<sup>14</sup>

## 3. Catholic Historiography and Theology (Caesar Baronius, Tommaso Campanella, Blaise Pascal)

I have already mentioned that Caesar Baronius<sup>17</sup> began the first volume of his *Annales Ecclesiastici* (1588-1607) with a life of Jesus, which would constitute a Catholic reference point for centuries.<sup>18</sup> Special mention also belongs to Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639) who wrote not only a *Life of Christ*,<sup>20</sup> but also *On the Words of Christ*,<sup>21</sup> *The Earthly Origin of Christ*<sup>22</sup> and *The Monarchy of the Messiah*. In these works Campanella presents a theological and apologetic interpretation of Jesus' life and teaching against Protestantism and Islam. He insists on harmonizing discrepancies in the gospel narratives and it is not clear whether this is only a *topos* of theological disputations or, on the contrary, refers to actual contemporary debate. The call for reform of

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<sup>8</sup> Pietro Pomponazzi, *Apologia*, V.Perrone Compagni, ed. (Firenze: Olschki, 2011), 232-244.

<sup>9</sup> Pietro Pomponazzi, *De Incantationibus*, V.Perrone Compagni, ed. (Firenze: Olschki, 2011), LXII-LXXI.

<sup>10</sup> See T.Gregory, *Mundana Sapientia* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> L.Firpo, *Il processo di Giordano Bruno* (Napoli: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1949); D.Quagliani (Roma: Editrice Salerno, 1993); E.Scapparone, "Efficacissimus Dei Filius. Sul Cristo Mago di Bruno", in: *La magia nell'Europa moderna* (Firenze: Olschki, 2007), 417- 444.

<sup>14</sup> See R.Mortier, "La remise en cause du christianisme au xviiiè siècle", *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles* 4 (1971): 415-443.

<sup>17</sup> See for example, d'Holbach, *Histoire critique*, 766 note 9.

<sup>18</sup> *Annales Ecclesiastici* (Venezia, 1601), 34-153.

<sup>20</sup> R.Amerio, ed., *Vita Cristi. Testo critico e traduzione*, 2 voll. (Roma: Centro Internazionale di studi umanistici, 1962-63).

<sup>21</sup> R.Amerio, ed., *De dictis Cristi* (Roma: Centro Internazionale di studi umanistici, 1969).

<sup>22</sup> R.Amerio, ed. (Roma: Centro Internazionale di studi umanistici, 1972).

Catholic theology, which was explicit in his *Apologia pro Galileo*, is absent here. A naturalistic interpretation of Jesus life on the basis of his natural philosophy seems present in Campanella's attention to astrology and what he calls a coincidence between historical and mystical events.

As is well-known, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) dealt with the figure of Jesus several times. I mention here only the *Abrégé de la vie de Jésus-Christ*, a gospel harmony probably written in 1655-56.<sup>23</sup> To counter arguments based on the discrepancies between the gospels, Pascal tries to harmonize the different accounts in a unique narrative that generally follows the chronological order of John's Gospel. The historical value of the gospels is affirmed. Pascal was indebted to the harmonies produced, in his own environment of Port-Royal, by Jansenius in 1549 and Arnauld (*Historia et concordia evangelica*, 1653). The large number of gospel harmonies produced around this time (Chemnitz, 1652; Callixtus, 1663; Le Clerc, 1699; B.Lamy, 1725) shows that the problem of the reliability of the gospels was very keenly felt.

#### 4. *The Jewish Interpretation of Jesus (Isaac of Troki)*

In 1593, the *Chizzuch Emunah*,<sup>24</sup> by Isaac ben Abraham of Troki (1533-1594) reveals the emergence of a Jewish vision of Jesus. This means that at the end of the sixteenth century the recovery of the Jewishness of Jesus had already begun, determining a different vision of his figure and of Christian origins. Isaac sees Jesus as a Jew who did not wish to abolish Mosaic law, did not violate the Sabbath nor the Jewish laws regarding food, and did not found a new law to replace the Jewish Law. According to Isaac, the Christological interpretations of the Jewish Bible found in the New Testament are considered unsustainable from an exegetical point of view, while the Hebrew Bible did not permit, if read correctly, the Christological interpretations subsequently given to it by the church. Isaac did not seek to condemn Jesus from the Jewish viewpoint; rather, he set out to reappropriate his Jewish identity

Thus, at the end of the 1500s a new perspective—a Jewish one—emerged in the cultural debate which influenced the historical interpretation of the figure of Jesus. This perspective showed how the Christian interpretation of Jesus and the Christological approach to the Hebrew Bible were exegetically unfounded.<sup>25</sup>

Isaac's work was translated into Spanish in 1621 under the title *Fortificacion de la Ley de Moseh*. Johann Christian Wagenseil would publish a Latin translation in *Tela ignea Satanae*,<sup>26</sup> in 1681, which was widely read.<sup>27</sup> The idea of the Jewishness of Jesus was therefore present to the scholars of Modern Age long before Joseph Salvador's Jesus book of 1838 or the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.

#### 5. *The Political Interpretation (Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, John Locke)*

In the middle of seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes<sup>30</sup> devoted the third and fourth part of the *Leviathan* to theological questions. The only point I wish to highlight concerns his central idea:

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<sup>23</sup> B.Pascal, *Oeuvres Complètes. Présentation et notes de Louis Lafuma* (Paris: Seuil, 1963), 297, the *Abregé de la Vie de Jésus-Christ* is at pp. 268-310. Italian translation: *Compendio alla vita di Gesù Cristo*, edited by M.Ranchetti (Macerata: Quodlibet, 1995).

<sup>24</sup> *Faith Strengthened*, Translated by M. Mocatta, Introduction by Trude Weis-Rosmarin (New York: KTAV, 1970) (Reprint of London's edition of 1850).

<sup>25</sup> On Isaac, see Pesce, "Per una ricerca storica su Gesù", 450-451.

<sup>26</sup> Vedi M.Waysblum, *Isaac of Troki and Christian Controversy in the 16th Century*, *JJS* 3 (1952): 62-77.

<sup>27</sup> See Jacques Gousset [1635-1704], *Jesu Christi evangelique veritas salutifera, demonstrata in confutatione Libri Chizzouk Emounah* (Amstelodami: Jacobus Borstius, 1712); Isaac Orobio de Castro (1617-1687), *Israel Vengé*. (London, 1770); G.B.English, *The Grounds of Christianity Examined, by Comparing the New Testament with the Old* (Boston: Printed for the Author, 1813), republished by R.H.Popkin in *Disputing Christianity* (New York: Humanity Books, 2007).

the kingdom of God. For Hobbes, the fundamental purpose of the Bible was “the re-establishment of the kingdom of God in Christ.” Hobbes’s thesis is that the *direct* kingdom of God over the people of Israel ended with King Saul, when the Jews claimed no longer to have God as their king, but a human king. Afterwards, God no longer reigned and, only with Jesus, was a new advent proclaimed of the kingdom of God in the eschatological future. Hobbes identified the centrality of the concept of the kingdom of God in Jesus’ message, pointing to its essentially eschatological character. Jesus is not king now: “the kingdom of Christ is not to begin till the general resurrection” (*Leviathan*, XLI). The church that succeeded him does not coincide with the kingdom of God, and neither does it have, nor can it have any political power. Eschatology as the great central theme of the historical interpretation of Jesus is already clearly posed at the middle of seventeenth century.

Spinoza’s<sup>31</sup> *Theological-political treatise*<sup>32</sup> falls within the history of our subject because its central theme is the moral message of Jesus extracted from the gospels. Jesus has a superior morality to that of Moses. Jesus’ message is non-political. Spinoza presents a profoundly de-eschatologized message of Jesus. Its moral superiority originates directly from Jesus’ rational, and (therefore, in the system of Spinoza) spiritual perception, without the need for a foundation in the supernatural. The importance of Spinoza in the subsequent development of European thought is so strong that it shapes future research on the image of Jesus

The importance of Locke (1632-1704) in the research on the historical Jesus lies in the fact that *The Reasonableness of Christianity*<sup>33</sup> defines Jesus as the son of God, but not in the sense of Nicene or Chalcedonian dogma.<sup>34</sup> For Locke Jesus is essentially the Messiah.<sup>35</sup> He underlines a distinction between Jesus and subsequent Christology, and asserts the need to understand the historical figure of Jesus within Jewish cultural categories. The gospels must therefore be interpreted on the basis of a philological and historical exegesis that takes into account their literary unity, rather than in the light of subsequent Christian theology.<sup>36</sup> The central content of Jesus’ message is eschatological: Jesus announces the future kingdom of God. Locke understands Jesus’ idea of the kingdom on the basis of the Jewish conception that divides the world’s history into the “present world” and the “future world to come.” However, according to Locke, Jesus distinguished between the end of the present world, which, according to him, actually took place when Jesus put an end “to their [the Jews’] church worship and commonwealth,” and “his last coming to judgment, in the glory of his Father.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, Locke relegates the advent of the kingdom to the end of the

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<sup>30</sup> See H.Graf Reventlow, *Bibel Autorität und Geist der Moderne* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1980), 328-370; P.D.Cooke, *Hobbes and Christianity. Reassessing the Bible in Leviathan* (London-New-York: Rowman and Littlefield - Lanham-Boulder, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> On Spinoza and Jesus: L.Bove, “Les raisons de l’échec de l’enseignement du Christ et la constitution du christianisme dans le *Traité théologico-politique*”, in M. Clément, ed., *Les Fruits de la dissension religieuse, fin XVI<sup>e</sup>-début XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l’Université de Saint-Etienne, 1998), 65-84. S.Frankel, *The Invention of Liberal Theology: Spinoza’s Theological-Political Analysis of Moses and Jesus*, *The Review of Politics* 63 (2001): 287-315; P.Relav, *Jesus Christus und Benedictus Spinoza in Zwiegespräch* (Berlin: Bibliographische Bureau, 1893); G.W.Dawes, ed., *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Search for the Jesus of History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 1-29; A.Matheron, *Christ et le salut des ignorants chez Spinoza* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1971).

<sup>32</sup> Benedictus de Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus. Trattato teologico-politico*, P.Totaro, ed. (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> J.Locke, *Scritti filosofici e religiosi. Edited by M.Sina*, (Milano: Rusconi, 1979); *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, 261-442.

<sup>34</sup> *The Reasonableness*, 284-285; 346-348.

<sup>35</sup> *The Reasonableness*, 279-296.

<sup>36</sup> For the exegetical methodology of Locke, see J.Locke, *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, Edited by A.W.Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>37</sup> *The Reasonableness*, 360.

future world, demolishing all the churches' claims to earthly power. The historical reconstruction of the figure of Jesus is strictly connected to a new vision of the early church and to a conception of the non political function of the churches.

Locke carefully reconstructs Jesus' historical experience, employing the gospels in a non-harmonized way. His vision of the historical figure of Jesus has not received, however, due consideration from specialists.<sup>38</sup>

#### 6. *The Negative Interpretation of Jesus (De tribus impostoribus, Jean Meslier, Paul-Henri Thiry Baron d'Holbach)*

The anonymous *Treatise of the Three Impostors (Moses, Jesus and Mahomet)*<sup>39</sup> has a very complex history that has been reconstructed several times over the past decades. There are two different versions of it, one in Latin the other in French.<sup>40</sup> According to S.Berti, the first edition, entitled *La Vie et L'Esprit de Spinosa*, was published in 1719. "The central structure of the chapters devoted to Jesus [...] consists of Vanini's dialogue *De Deo in De Arcanis* [...] while the ancient source is Celsus..."<sup>41</sup> This work is also of interest as an example of a negative evaluation of Jesus present in European culture in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In view of the success of this work at the time, it would certainly be enlightening for research on the historical figure of Jesus to trace its influences and eventual metamorphoses.

The *Testament* of Jean Meslier (1664-1729)<sup>42</sup> published posthumously by Voltaire, then reutilized by d'Holbach represents Jesus as a figure of little value, an imposter destined to failure. The falseness of his message is demonstrated by the fact that the kingdom of God he spoke about never came to pass. Secondly, Meslier pays close attention to the contradictions among the gospels through a series of precise and systematic observations. Finally, it is the question of the miracles that draws his critical attention, following a recurrent trope. The miracle stories are "vain lies," "invented to imitate the stories of pagan poets, as appears evident from the similarities that exist between the former and the latter."<sup>43</sup>

Paul Thiry, baron d'Holbach (1723-1789) is worthy of our attention above all for his *Histoire critique de Jésus Christ, ou, Analyse raisonnée des Evangiles*,<sup>44</sup> a critical work that is intensely critical of both the historical value of the gospels and the figure of Jesus himself. Although his was an extreme position, it must be taken into consideration as a symptom of a widespread tendency in several areas of eighteenth-century European culture. He makes use of methods, results and thought patterns that, in other authors, led to different outcomes from his own.

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<sup>38</sup> The interpretation of Jesus in the age of the French revolution deserves careful attention. See the works of D.Menozzi: *Les interprétations politiques de Jésus de l'Ancien Régime à la Révolution* (Paris: Seuil, 1983); "Lettura politica della figura di Gesù nella cultura italiana del Settecento", in M.Rosa, ed., *Cattolicesimo e lumi nel Settecento italiano* (Roma: Herder, 1981), 127-176; "Le interpretazioni di Gesù nell'età della rivoluzione francese", *Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi* 21 (2004): 617-643.

<sup>39</sup> F.Charles-Daubert, ed., *Le "traité des trois imposteurs" et l'"Esprit de Spinosa"* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1999); S.Berti, *Anonimo, Trattato dei tre impostori* (Torino: Einaudi, 1994).

<sup>40</sup> P.Totaro, "Da Antonio Magliabechi a Philip von Stosch: varia fortuna del "De Tribus Impostoribus"", in E.Canone, ed., *"Bibliothecae selectae" da Cusano a Leopardi* (Firenze: Olschki, 1993), 377-417.

<sup>41</sup> S.Berti, "Introduzione", in *Trattato dei tre impostori*, LXX.

<sup>42</sup> *Le bon sens du curé J.Meslier suivi de son Testament*, (Paris: Au palais des thèrmes de Julien, 1802), 295-380; R. Desne, *Extraits du Memoire de Jean Meslier, 1664-1729* (Paris: Editions rationalistes, 1973); Jean Meslier, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974); *Études sur le curé Meslier* (Paris: Centre aixois d'études, 1966).

<sup>43</sup> *Le bon sens du curé J.Meslier*, 329. The comparison between Christian and pagan miracles at pp. 329-348.

<sup>44</sup> P.Thiry, baron d'Holbach, *Histoire critique de Jésus Christ ou Analyse raisonnée des Evangiles*, A.Hunwick, ed., (Genève: Droz, 1997); *Oeuvres Philosophiques Complètes. Tome II* (Paris: Editions Alive, 1999), 644-815.

For example, d'Holbach draws upon the *Chizzuk Emunah* of Isaac of Troki, even if Isaac was a believing Karaite Jew. His use of the inconsistencies among the gospels serves to discredit these texts as a whole, while in many other authors it was simply the sign of a critical awareness that urged towards a more serious examination of evangelical sources.

### 7. *Jesus and the Church* (Thomas Woolston, John Toland, Thomas Chubb)

Thomas Woolston's (1670-1733) publication of the *Six discourses on the miracles of our Saviour* was the focus of widespread debate. The work, translated into French,<sup>47</sup> was sometimes attributed to d'Holbach, who used it in his *Histoire critique*.<sup>48</sup> The value and meaning of Jesus' miracles and their appropriate role in defining the meaning of his historical-religious figure was one of the most recurrent themes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Some works of John Toland (1670-1722)<sup>49</sup> are fundamental for the historical research on Jesus: *Christianity not Mysterious* (London, 1696); *Nazarenus, or Jewish, Gentile, or Mahometan Christianity* (London, 1718);<sup>50</sup> *Tetradyms* (London, 1720).

*Nazarenus*, is first of all important because of its affirmation of the Jewishness of Jesus and its repercussions on the Jewishness of the early church. Jesus did not found a new religion, did not cancel the Mosaic Law. The primitive church and the subsequent pagan Christians, by abandoning the Jewish law and elaborating different theological conceptions and religious practices, betrayed Jesus himself: "the articles of their belief and the rubric of their practice, be manifestly the very things which Jesus went about to destroy."<sup>53</sup> *The Primitive Constitution of the Christian Church*<sup>54</sup> posed the problem of the discontinuity between Jesus and subsequent dogma. This would be a central issue throughout all subsequent research. Furthermore, Toland observed that Jesus, unlike the subsequent church, never made use of political instruments.<sup>55</sup> Early Christianity was made up of Jewish followers of Jesus who retained their Jewishness, and of "pagan" followers of Jesus. That is to say, there were Jewish Christians (such as Nazarenes and Ebionites) and pagan Christians. Because of their inveterate hatred of the Jews, the pagan Christians rejected all Jewish practices and refused to entertain "familiarity or commerce with the Jews."<sup>57</sup> Toland also claims "some of the fundamental doctrines of Mahometanism to have their rise ...] from the earliest monuments of the Christian religion,"<sup>58</sup> namely, those Judeo-Christian texts that

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<sup>47</sup> Th. Woolston, *Six discours sur les miracles de Notre Sauveur*. W. Trapnell, ed. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001), with commentary and bibliography.

<sup>48</sup> Th. Woolston, *Discours sur les miracles de Jésus-Christ* (Amsterdam?, 1769), translation attributed to d'Holbach. Other French translation: *Examen critique des Actes des apôtres* (London [actually Paris], 1859).

<sup>49</sup> G. Carabelli, *Tolandiana. Materiali bibliografici per lo studio dell'opera e della fortuna di John Toland (1670-1722)*, (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1975); C. Giuntini, *Toland e i liberi pensatori del '700* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1974). Extensive bibliography in L. Mannarino, *John Toland, Dissertations diverses, Edition, introduction et notes* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2005), 169-182. See also A. Sabetti, *John Toland. Un irregolare della società e della cultura inglese tra Seicento e Settecento* (Napoli: Liguori, 1976). T. Dagron, "Le Christianisme sans mystères de John Toland et la théologie critique hollandaise", *Libertinage et philosophie au xvii<sup>e</sup>-siècle* 8 (2004): 71-90.

<sup>50</sup> Italian translation of *Nazarenus* and *Christianity not Mysterious*: C. Giuntini, ed., *John Toland. Opere* (Torino: UTET, 2002), 411-574 and 93-187. French translation: *John Toland*, T. Dagron, ed. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2005), with an important introduction (pp. 13-107).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, 70.

<sup>54</sup> English edition and French translation of 1742 are published in: L. Jaffro, ed., *La constitution primitive de l'Eglise Chrétienne. The Primitive Constitution of the Christian Church* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2003).

<sup>55</sup> Jaffro, *La Constitution*, 196.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, vi.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, 5.

reflect the original ideas of Jesus. Toland therefore re-assesses the historical importance and reliability of the so-called apocryphal texts.<sup>59</sup> Alongside and countering Paul, Toland identifies the Gospel of Barnabas and pseudo-Clementine literature.<sup>60</sup> Toland emphasizes how the Ebionites and Nazarenes were “mortal enemies to Paul,” who is defined as an apostate and transgressor of the law.<sup>61</sup> “The original plan of Christianity” was that of the Nazarenes, not of Paul.<sup>62</sup> Toland’s works always triggered heated reactions and circulated widely in Europe.

Thomas Chubb (1679-1747), published in 1738 *The true Gospel of Jesus Christ asserted*. The subtitle is revealing: “wherein is shewn, what is and what is not that Gospel; what was the great and good end it was intended to serve; [...] and how [...] that end has in great measure been frustrated.” The salvation announced by Jesus is essentially eschatological, and this is closely linked to the negation of the political function of churches.

There are three fundamental elements in Jesus’ message. First, he demands observation of the law of reason; second, he calls for repentance in cases of transgression; third, he announces a final judgment by God who will mete punishment on those who do not respect the law and do not repent after their disobedience.<sup>64</sup> The life of Christ was a rigorous conformity of his sentiments and deeds with that inalterable rule of action founded in reason. Christ “preached his own life if I may so speak, and lived his own doctrine.”<sup>65</sup> “The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not an historical account of matters of fact.”<sup>66</sup> This essential gospel has been corrupted and perverted by “many absurd doctrines and superstitious practices.”<sup>67</sup> All of the various theologies of justification and grace and the ecclesiastical practices of the churches are considered as a perversion of Jesus’ message. Chubb bases himself particularly on the Gospel of Matthew, marginalizing the thought of Paul. The purpose of Chubb’s attempt was to rediscover the authentic message of Jesus.

Jesus’ wish was for people to live in societies based on relations of friendship, rather than on relations of authority. “That which has been *most of all injurious* to the gospel of Christ, was the *blending together Christian and civil societies* and making them the same thing.”<sup>68</sup> Once again, the discussion about the political function of the churches is central in the reconstruction of the historical figure of Jesus and the essence of his message.

## 8. A Conclusion

In Modern Age the conditions were posed that until today permit an historical research on Jesus: among them, the birth of modern philology, historical method, and history of religions. The authors and works that I have mentioned represent the tip of the iceberg, isolated fragments of the modern concerns about the historical figure of Jesus. Reimarus is part of this modern concern, not its beginning. A permanent conflict among independent scholars, Catholic and Protestant theologians is the background of the historical research on Jesus in the last five hundred years. What is characteristic of this research is not a linear evolution in subsequent phases but the systemic confrontation between conflicting groups of scholars and academic institutions. Obviously different moments can be distinguished in the European culture that had different impact on a new

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<sup>59</sup> See his *A Catalogue of Books attributed in the Primitive Time to Jesus Christ* (London, 1699). F.Schmidt, “John Toland, critique déiste de la littérature apocryphe”, in: P.Geoltrain et alii, eds., *La fable apocryphe. I.* (Brepols: Turnhout, 1990), 119-145.

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, 23.

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem, 29.

<sup>62</sup> Ibidem, 33.

<sup>64</sup> *The true Gospel of Jesus Christ asserted* (London: Cox, 1738), 18-19.

<sup>65</sup> Ibidem, 55.

<sup>66</sup> Ibidem, 43.

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem, 138.

<sup>68</sup> Ibidem, 180.

understanding of Jesus historical figure. After Humanism and Renaissance, we have at least to remember “the crisis of the European conscience” as Paul Hazard called the period spanning from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century.<sup>70</sup> But in the different periods a constant systemic conflict took place between different academic institutions and between independent scholars and theologians about the historical figure of Jesus.

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<sup>70</sup> *La crise de la conscience européenne (1680-1715)* (Paris: Boivin, 1935).