

THE REBEL JESUS?

JESUS OF NAZARETH: AN APPLICATION OF STRAIN THEORY

By Simon Cross



INTRODUCTION

In what is one of the finest popular Christmas songs going, Jackson Browne sings about “the birth of the rebel Jesus”. Not a religious man (in the song Browne describes himself as a pagan and a heathen) Browne has little time for the institution of the church, which comes in for a bit of a battering in the lyrics. Rather he declares himself on the side of Jesus the rebel, the man who cleared the temple of the ‘robbers’. It’s a great song, but of course it’s not uncontroversial, there is an ongoing push back by certain sections of the Christian church who really don’t like the message of the song, and who, in some cases, dispute the idea of Jesus as a ‘rebel’. So was Jesus genuinely a rebel? Or was he in fact as some critics would have it, a conformist, someone who stuck to the rules because they are - in fact - the rules? To look at this question I’m going to use a matrix developed by the sociologist Robert Merton, to demonstrate his theory of ‘strain’.

STRAIN THEORY

Robert Merton was a distinguished scholar, with many cultural insights to his name. One of the many things he was interested in was the concept of deviance, and why people engage in behaviours that could be considered deviant. In looking at this he was developing on work already done by Emile Durkheim one of the founding ‘fathers’ of Structural Functionalism, and the person who popularly developed the term ‘anomie’ to describe the point at which there is a disconnect between the goals of a society and the means to achieve them. Anomie effectively means ‘without norms’ – a state of lawlessness or lack of rules, and was used by Durkheim to explain motivation to suicide.

Merton developed on this idea of anomie, and looked at it to help explain deviance – this he did by recognising that the tension an individual is under when they are unable to achieve social goals can lead to them adopting deviant means. If society values money for instance and an individual buys into or accepts the validity of society’s goals but is not in a position where they can make or earn money, then they find themselves ‘strained’. When they are strained they have a number of options, or modes of adaption.

If they continue to accept society’s goals, and they also accept the ‘institutionalised means’ or the socially acceptable ways of achieving those goals, then they are what Merton would label a ‘Conformist’. If on the other hand they choose to reject the social goals, while continuing to accept the socially acceptable means, then they are a ‘ritualist’. Those who Accept

cultural goals, but reject the institutionalised means of attaining them are called ‘innovators’ effectively these individuals are ready to find novel means of achieving the goals that society has set out – can’t earn enough money? How about committing a crime? This is innovation according to the Strain theory matrix. Then there are others who reject cultural goals, and also reject the means by which they are supposed to achieve them, and these individuals Merton labels as ‘retreatists’ they are the ones who say ‘no thanks’ to society and pitch their tent in a forest where they live apart from the ‘normal’ world. In the first place then we have to ask whether the figure of Jesus of Nazareth we see in the New Testament fits in to any of these categories.

So how does Jesus of Nazareth, from what we know of him through Biblical texts, relate to the cultural norms of his time, in terms of both goals and means of achieving them? This is complicated to consider, of course, as we’d have to be relatively clear about what the goals of the time were. The issue with this is that there were a number of effectively competing cultural goals, so lets briefly consider one or two of them. In the first place: family. The family for first century Palestinians was crucial, both to survival and to identity. Obligations to ones family were primary, and it is here that we see Jesus contravening social norms. When asked about discipleship Jesus explained that any would-be follower would have to be willing to effectively renounce their family in order to follow him. The word in translation here is ‘hate’ – that followers would have to hate their parents, wives, even children to become his disciples. This is not as we understand hate today, rather it’s a strong demand that whoever wants to be a disciple must be ready to contravene the most fundamental duties of family life.

Lets take as a second example of a common cultural norm, purity. For observant Jews of the first century, purity was all important. It demonstrated their piety and their unwillingness to compromise God’s law. A strict sabbath observance, a legalistic approach to social interactions – there were all kinds of purity codes which they had to follow. But while he could certainly be understood as observant, Jesus didn’t seem overly concerned with purity codes, he strayed outside of the lines of conventionally understood purity norms on a number of occasions in his interactions with the sick, ill, disabled and foreign for instance. So Jesus seems to have been relatively unconcerned by the necessity to achieve either the family oriented goals, or the purity oriented goals. Could we then say that he was dedicated to achieving a larger scale – meta goal? This could be, for instance, the returning of the governance of his country to his people, in other words expelling the hated Roman invaders. There certainly were a number of contemporaneous Messiah characters who had this goal, I have written about them before.

For these characters the cultural goal was clear, in Jesus though this doesn't seem to be quite so obvious, he makes no attempt to call for insurrection or even civil disobedience particularly. He defies the authorities, but he also defies the Jewish authorities too, he doesn't conform to the stereo type of this kind of adherence to a common cultural goal.

My argument is then that Jesus doesn't really demonstrate a strong appetite to achieve cultural goals, nor does he seem too concerned with the institutionalised means which surround them. His rejection of means moves him away from Merton's ideas of conformity or ritualism, archetypes of which we might find in other characters in the New Testament stories. What then about innovation or retreatism? Many criminals would fall into what Merton describes as innovation, they come up with new ways of achieving goals which are unachievable using conventional means. Jesus is certainly innovative, but he doesn't share the apparent desire to achieve the goals that others do. He's not concerned about fame or fortune, neither does he seem concerned about the goals of family welfare or purity, so while his interactions are novel, his goals take him outside the realm of the innovator. So can we call him a 'retreatist'? While according to the stories, Jesus incorporated elements of retreating behaviour into his life, it would be difficult to label him as a retreatist. He took part in conventional society, he lived among normal people going about their normal lives. He didn't separate himself off from them – there were people who did adopt that kind of lifestyle in his time, they were known as the Essenes, and they represented a kind of early 'monasticism' for want of a better expression. But while the Essenes took themselves off to live in a permanent form of retreatism, Jesus maintained a place within conventional society, spending time with his family and recruiting his followers from among the normal working people of his time.

REBELLION

So does Jesus fall outside of Merton's strain theory matrix? In a way yes, but also no, because Merton adds a fifth box on to his model of adaptations to strain, which is where the subject develops both new goals, and new means to achieve them. When someone fits into this fifth adaptation box, Merton describes this as 'rebellion'. This category does seem to be the 'best fit' for Jesus of Nazareth, who not only rejects standard social norms but effectively proposes new ones – or rather a return to old ones. Because the rebellion of Jesus is not so much the development of an entirely new set of goals and means, but a determined call back

to a form of Judaism which I have written about previously, a way of living that prioritises the poor and the outcast, that calls for a radical loving approach to enemies.

It is this, I think that Jackson Browne and other writers and thinkers outside of the boundaries of the religious-industrial complex seem to recognise, that Jesus is not this figure of legalistic piety, nor even the radically innovative Jewish nationalist. Instead Jesus represents a kind of rebellion which transcends the four stage matrix of goals and means, and develops new goals and new means by which priorities are turned on their heads. This is the space where, I would argue, followers of Jesus should find themselves. I'll leave the last words to Jackson Browne again, who notes that at Christmas some of us will find space to give to the poor, if the generosity should 'seize us':

"But if any one of us should interfere
In the business of why there are poor
They get the same as the rebel Jesus."

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IMAGE

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