

# Partisan polemics

by [Marcus J. Borg](#) in the [October 7, 1998](#) issue

*By Charlotte Allen, The Human Christ: The Search for the Historical Jesus. (Free Press, 383 pp.)*

Charlotte Allen's book is both an impressive achievement and a work marred by the author's obvious disapproval of her subject matter. Allen, a freelance writer and, in her own words, "not a biblical scholar," has a first-rate intellect and has read and digested an enormous amount of material. She has provided the most comprehensive one-volume history of the quest for the historical Jesus that is available in English.

The book's first section focuses on early Christian perceptions of Jesus up to the formation of the creeds. The second moves from the Enlightenment to the present, from the coffee houses and universities of 17th- and 18th-century Europe to today's Jesus Seminar. Allen describes the eroticism and sadism of 19th- and 20th-century literary and cinematic portraits of Jesus. She summarizes the work of a host of scholars from the 1600s to the present, setting them in their historical, cultural and intellectual milieu. Her writing combines journalistic clarity and an ear for scholarly detail. Glimpses of the lives of scholars add interest and sometimes insight. Though Luke Johnson's dust-jacket comment that "he stayed up all night" reading the book strikes me as a bit hyperbolic, it is a good read.

But Allen's achievement is undermined by her conviction that the quest for the historical Jesus is a mistake. According to Allen, the god of this quest is modernity, and its faith is in science. Its practitioners range from vigorous debunkers of Christianity to perhaps well-meaning scholars who are nevertheless unreflectively committed to the truncated worldview and methods of modernity.

For example, Allen states that the true ancestor of modern Jesus scholarship is Celsus, the second-century pagan who mocked and vilified Jesus and Christian beliefs. In her view, not accepting the virgin birth as historically factual discloses modern scholarship's abandonment of Christian faith and its allegiance to faith in science (as if the supernatural elements in the birth stories were the only reason for

thinking of them as metaphorical narratives). And seeing a liberation theme in Jesus' message and activity is the result of a misguided faith in liberation theology. Allen seems not to consider that the theme may really be there.

Allen's bias is also apparent in the amount of space she devotes to various scholars. Morton Smith's sketch of Jesus as a magician and practitioner of a nocturnal homosexual initiation rite receives two-and-a-half pages; John Dominic Crossan's work gets one, despite the far greater significance of the latter's contributions to the discipline. The obvious reason: Smith's portrait of Jesus as "a bathhouse shaman" better serves Allen's cause of discrediting the quest.

Allen sees no light anywhere in contemporary Jesus scholarship, except among a few scholars who emphasize the Jewishness of Jesus and whom she regards as allies in her quest for a human Christ consistent with her supernaturalist version of Christian orthodoxy. (Readers wanting a more balanced journalistic treatment of the current scene might read Russell Shorto's *Gospel Truth* [Riverhead, 1997].)

Allen does not adequately recognize that the quest has included revisionists, not only debunkers. Though some scholars involved in the quest have sought to discredit Christianity, others have been deeply concerned with the revisioning and renewing of Christianity.

In short, this is a very partisan book. Allen sometimes caricatures positions, and she is a master of the dismissive (and often unfair) put-down. Polemical writing is fine as long as it takes seriously a maxim I learned in college: no significant thinker is stupid (wrong, perhaps, but not stupid). If we make significant thinkers sound stupid, then we have either misunderstood or are misrepresenting them.

Other than mentioning that she is a Catholic, Allen says little about the vantage point from which she makes her pronouncements. It needs to be teased out, and seems to include a belief in the essential historicity of the spectacular stories and of the claims that Jesus had "a frightening divine authority," and saw himself as more than a prophet and as playing "a sacrificial role as 'ransom for many.'" If one accepts these claims as the starting point, then the quest for the historical Jesus will seem foundationally mistaken. Allen thus raises once again the central theological question that has dominated the quest from the beginning: Does it matter?

The book's title, *The Human Christ*, indicates her position. Even as a human being, Jesus was the divine figure of Christian experience, devotion, witness and theology,

apparently in his self-awareness as well as in fact. Allen might just as well have called the book *The Divine Jesus*.