

What does it mean to say that the search for the historical Jesus is neither historically possible nor religiously or theologically necessary?

What it means to say that the search is not historically possible is that, because of the nature of our sources, we are never able either to affirm or deny a historical continuity between Jesus himself, on the one hand, and the earliest Christian witnesses, on the other. Thus we can never say either (with Patterson) that the earliest witnesses simply explicated the christology that Jesus himself had already at least implied or (with Funk) that the earliest witnesses turned away from Jesus' own witness to the reign of God in order to replace it with their own christological claims about Jesus himself.

What it means to say that the search is not religiously or theologically necessary is that, because what the earliest witnesses and all other Christians after them assert about Jesus—namely, that he is the Christ of God—is an *existential-historical* assertion, no *empirical-historical* assertion could, in the nature of the case, ever possibly verify or falsify it. Whatever Jesus himself may or may not have thought, said, and done, the community that came together in response to him either implied or asserted him to be the Christ, which is to say, of decisive significance for human existence. But whether or not this existential-historical assertion is true cannot be decided either way by empirical-historical inquiry back behind the earliest witness. So, in the nature of the case, a search for the empirical-historical Jesus is neither religiously nor theologically necessary for those who make or imply the christological assertion concerning Jesus' decisive significance.

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