

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

ments," compiled from oral accounts at least one or two generations after his death. The historical inquiry into Jesus began during the Enlightenment, and was long contentious. German scholar David Friedrich Strauss lost a teaching job because his *Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1835) judged "sacred history" to be "fable." Thanks to the work of archaeologists and others, says the University of Chicago's David Tracy, "more has been written about Jesus in the last 20 years than in the previous 2,000."

Scholars know that Jesus lived for roughly three decades during the first century A.D., and that he was born as a Jew, was circumcized as a Jew, and prayed as a Jew. He referred to himself as "the Son of man," but never as "the Son of God," "the Servant of the Lord," or "the Messiah." There is no evidence that he aimed to found a church. But he spoke with great authority, personalizing his relationship with God by calling Him, in his native Aramaic, *Abba*, a term akin to "father dear."

New Testament scholars do not know what Jesus looked like, whether he was an only child, where he was born (in Bethlehem, or in Nazareth, where he grew up), or when. (Christmas seems to have replaced a pagan Roman feast day coinciding with the winter solstice.)

But does all this matter?

What concerns Tracy, a Catholic priest, Murphy reports, is not biographical facts but faith. No research, he thinks, can reveal what *any* historical figure "really felt or thought." Dutch theologian Edward Schillebeeckx sees in Christology both limits and opportunities. "The New Testament," he says, "is the testimony of believing people, and what they are saying is not history, but expressions of their belief in Jesus as Christ." Through knowing the historical Jesus, that faith can be "filled up."

Veblen's God

"Bellamy and Veblen's Christian Morals" by Charles G. Leathers, in *The Journal of Economic Issues* (Dec. 1986), Dept. of Economics, California State Univ., Sacramento, Calif. 95819-2694.

The irascible Norwegian-American economist Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) was the scourge of America's Golden Age of business expansion. His major work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), written when robber barons were building Newport mansions and cities teemed with ill-housed immigrants, added "conspicuous consumption" to the language.

The Wisconsin-born misanthrope's Yale Ph.D. gained him a series of university posts, in which he vivisected his colleagues and discouraged students' ambitions. A rationalist in theory if not by nature, Veblen railed against organized Christianity. The church's "archaic" values, he said, impeded technological progress and the fair distribution of wealth.

Yet Veblen flirted with Christianity in a 1910 essay, "Christian Morals and the Competitive System." Why? He was drawn, says Leathers, a University of Arizona economist, to Edward Bellamy's utopian fiction.

Like Veblen, Bellamy rejected the church and the capitalist ethos of individual achievement. Yet Bellamy had hopes for the new Protestant

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY



Thorstein Veblen bedeviled his professors at Yale, where this portrait by Edwin Child now hangs. But radicals relished his harsh attacks on "conspicuous consumption."

"Social Gospel," which preached salvation via work for the common good. His 1888 novel, *Looking Backward*, forecast the fall of capitalism in the year 2000 and the rise of a nationalized economy tended by a contented workers' army. The revolution's guide would be an old spiritual impulse: brotherly love.

Bellamy's so-called natural Christianity supplied Veblen with a convincing revolutionary force. Brotherly love, a corollary to what he elsewhere called "the instinct of workmanship," would be the wellspring of social change. Veblen skirted brotherly love's Judeo-Christian origins by dating it back to "the golden rule of peaceable savages."

Natural Christianity fades from Veblen's later writings, as does revolution. Leathers reckons that the rise of progressivism may briefly have aroused in Veblen an uncharacteristic feeling of optimism. But ultimately, Veblen lost hope of changing man's "pecuniary" mind.

Plato's Tragic Ruler

"The Unhappy Philosopher: Plato's *Republic* as Tragedy" by John D. Harman, in *Polity* (Vol. XVIII, No. 4, 1986), Thompson Hall, Univ. of Massachusetts, Amherst, Mass. 01003.

Who shall rule the people? Plato (428–circa 348 B.C.), born to a powerful Athenian family, spent most of his years far from politics, sheltered in the Western world's original groves of academe. (He founded the Academy for natural and human sciences, often considered the first university, in about 387 B.C.) Yet an early brush with political life must have caused him to