

Weekend Australian

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All-round Country Edition

Judas's side of the story

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Books letting the Bible's most reviled traitor off the hook reflect a continuing fascination with Jesus, reports religious affairs writer Jill Rowbotham

LAST time someone proclaimed the gospel of the traitorous and reviled disciple Judas, it was National Geographic, attempting to make a motza out of a version of his life written on papyrus about AD150, restored and translated at its behest. That was a year ago. Now we have another: The Gospel According to Judas by Benjamin Iscariot, from British novelist and peer Jeffrey Archer and Australian biblical scholar Francis Moloney. It is written in the style of a gospel. That these two documents bookend the religious year, from Easter to Easter, raises questions about the meaning of originality, authenticity and commerciality.

In National Geographic's version, Judas, Jesus' most favoured disciple, is obeying his master's command with the betrayal so that his destiny can unfold as was intended. The Archer version has it that Judas was tricked into his treacherous behaviour by a scribe who persuaded him Jesus would be saved from death. Judas later fled to a religious community to live out his days, although these were cut short when it was overrun by the Roman army.

One thing is beyond doubt: when Moloney, a world-renowned biblical scholar and head of the Catholic Salesian Fathers of Don Bosco in Australia and the Pacific, was approached to help Archer, he agreed for the love of Jesus and the desire to spread the good news about him: a very old-fashioned biblical reason and an evangelical challenge.

'As someone who has written 36 books and whose books are read by a very small circle of specialists -- so my books are read by the convinced all the time -- maybe this is a way of getting out into the mass of the public the way in which we can read the story of Jesus in a more critical way, in a way those of us trained in the Bible have been doing for 150 years,' Moloney says.

'My hope was that once they had read the Gospel of Judas in this new way, they might go back to the four Gospels [of the Bible] and begin to ask questions there as well.'

It was smart thinking. Readers who have tired of the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John may be enticed back by the prospect of a new take on one of history's most despised figures, the disciple who the Bible says betrayed Jesus. It also is a fair bet that many rusted-on Archer readers have read the Dan Brown blockbuster *The Da Vinci Code* and seen the movie, a tale of conspiracy and murder that did nothing for the Catholic Church's credibility and demonised one of its sub-groups, *Opus Dei*. In Brown's story, Jesus and Mary Magdalene are lovers and the child they have has descendants living today that the church doesn't want anyone to know about lest it challenge the official version of events.

Less risible is the contention that the powerful role of women in the early church, starting with Magdalene, was suppressed, then written out of history.

Although the latest of Judas's defences was not Vatican-assisted -- Archer made a personal approach to an elderly cardinal who suggested Moloney help instead -- it could have been seen as the ideal fictional antidote to *The Da Vinci Code*. In it, the basic chain of events unfolds as it does in the New Testament, although Moloney has added wonderful footnotes at the end that add interest and colour. Judas dies, but not in any of the lurid ways the original Gospel writers

recorded, although it is a grim enough demise. His son, Benjamin, says it takes place many years after the Jesus story when the community of the Jewish Essene sect in which the then 70-year-old Judas is living is overrun by the Roman army.

Moloney says the church has been vulnerable to The Da Vinci Code thesis because of the way believers have traditionally read the Gospels. 'The tragedy is we read them as if they were 21st-century books. We read them at face value, as if they were reporting day by day events and the bulk of the theological message is lost. An uninformed reading of the Gospels glosses over the serious differences in the four accounts. There are great tensions in the four narratives and people just ignore them. That leaves us open to attack by the Dan Browns of this world. This non-critical reading of our foundation texts makes us look very superficial and that's very difficult for us to combat.'

Jesus differs remarkably depending on the Gospel. Mark's Jesus, according to Moloney, says yes to the will of God, which means the kingdom on earth is going to happen only through Christ's death and resurrection; while the Jesus of Matthew is a teacher, with large set pieces such as the Sermon on the Mount, someone who invokes and replaces the 'teaching Moses' of the Old Testament.

Moloney's Christ has elements drawn from both portraits. 'I wanted to draw him out as someone who is much more interactive with the men and women around him, so he teaches them, he explains things to them more and he forgives their mistakes; someone who is close to the human condition and yet there is still a certain distance.'

The prospect of all this was enough to persuade Moloney into a year-long working relationship with Archer throughout 2006. And although it might have seemed logical that Archer was after a mass audience while Moloney's interest was the story, it was the reverse: Archer has insisted in various interviews that he has been interested in the story for a long time, and Moloney is openly interested in gaining a big readership.

While Moloney was reaching out through the unlikely conduit of Judas via the even more unlikely collaboration with a former prison inmate -- Archer was jailed on perjury and other charges in 2001 -- another Melbourne scholar was working on another version of Jesus, entirely based on Mark's Gospel.

Latrobe University sociology professor John Carroll's *The Existential Jesus* is remarkable for the intensity of the writer's admiration for his subject. Carroll denies he is an agnostic, but concedes he has never been a practising Christian. He seems much more excited about Jesus than nine out of 10 adherents you may meet. 'They are incapable of telling his story in a way that rings true today,' Carroll says. Not raised in the church, he traces the beginnings of his fascination to when he saw Donatello's bronze of the crucifixion in St Antonio's church in Padua 20 years ago. 'I saw it and started shaking at the knees and thought: 'God, this is enough to make one believe.' His life was already devoted to the connection between culture and meaning, and he believed 'big stories from long ago' are what give meaning and shape to our lives.

He found Mark's Jesus compelling and convened a reading group to study the Gospel, which was the first one written, supposedly about AD70. '[Jesus is] really interested in the nature of being, of the self, that's why he is so good for today. Who am I? What in me is important? This great story is in pursuit of that question. He's very like, in a very potent way, the lonely individual trying to grope along a life path in the modern world.'

Carroll argues Mark's Jesus is a man for modern times but that he has always been misunderstood, including by the disciples of the time, who he says are hopeless.

'They all learn nothing from Jesus and he gets fed up with them in chapter four.' According to him, only Judas gets Jesus' message, but unfortunately 'wants to be him', compared with Peter, a devoted follower who never really understands.

Moloney and Carroll agree about the centrality of Peter and Judas as characters in the Gospels -- each betrays Jesus, Judas with a kiss in the Garden of

Gethsemane, indicating to Herod's soldiers which man they should arrest, and Peter by denying him three times. Then Peter turns on Judas.

What is striking is that Moloney and Carroll are enormously enthusiastic about the Jesus story, as are a lot of others in these early years of the 21st century. Moloney, at 67, is still enthralled after a lifetime of belief and 46 years in the church, while Carroll declares Mark's cryptic Gospel far more interesting to decipher than a Da Vinci code.

National Geographic kicked up maximum fuss about its scholarly coup and another American historian, Elaine Pagels, has recently co-written a book about the papyrus called Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity. Even the atheists are agitated about Jesus: Sam Harris's Letter to a Christian Nation and Richard Dawkins's The God Delusion have made waves across the world since they appeared last year. They take God and the church so seriously and regard them as such potential forces for harm that they have come out swinging.

So why can't the church inspire more people? To be fair, parts of it can. Some developing countries in Africa and South America are responsive and in the indifferent West progress is being made in parishes where young people are inspired by a strong and articulate leadership: think Peter Jensen, the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney; or George Pell, the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney; or even Pentecostal successes such as the Hillsong congregations. But in general the picture is bleak. Western Europe is a relative wasteland, the West is post-Christian and in Australia attendance numbers are bad: according to the last published Australian Bureau of Statistics census figures, for 2001, 68 per cent of Australians identified as Christian. However, the authoritative National Church Life Survey, which analyses all main denominations in parallel with the census every five years, estimated average attendance was about 9 per cent of the population in any week. There is no reason to think this will be any better when the results of the 2006 census and the concurrent NCLS are released later this year.

Moloney argues the Catholic Church in Australia has a small, vocal right wing and a small, quiet left wing. 'My real concern is the vast bulk of Catholics who are in the middle,' he says. 'They are dropping away from all practice of their faith. I don't think they are antagonistic, I think they are discouraged. I just think they do not find a lot of hope.'

'We are dealing with a significant body of people who were once at the centre of the culture and now have become marginalised. We have not developed strategies to live as a marginalised people of God. We still go on as if we were at the centre and this means we can determine culture by law and ritual.' It is, he says, 'a Christian church which has lost touch with the power and message of Jesus Christ'.

Exactly, says Carroll. 'The church has an inherent problem, that it is an ethical institution. It has to bind itself together with a series of moral law and creeds and doctrines and lists of commandments, and once you begin doing that it is antithetical to poetry, to imagination and to story.'

Carroll says it is hard to attract people into the ministry if the brightest and best of the generation have a sense the church is half dead. 'The church needs to attract people with great imagination and talent. I think Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ was an attempt to revitalise the story. Pentecostals with their music are more successful at this than most these days. And the bit that works for the church is Christmas, when they get young children recounting the Bethlehem scenes, that's often quite magical.'

'But the church is paralysed with worry about the empty cathedrals. My message is simple: doctrine kills story, downplay the moral teaching and generate enchantment, and it will make people want to belong to the story. The Christians have the greatest of the Western stories in their hands and are doing little with it and it's a story that really speaks today.'

Moloney has done his best for Jesus, Judas and Archer, too. He recounts an exchange during one of the many joint interviews the pair gave while promoting the book. Archer strenuously denied his motivation had anything to do with his own redemption but conceded to one questioner that writing the book had led him 'to a deeper understanding of the mystery of Jesus. But my problem is it only [becomes] more of a mystery,' he concluded. Moloney seized his chance and offered this clincher: 'As far as I am concerned that is a journey of faith.' Archer had no reply.