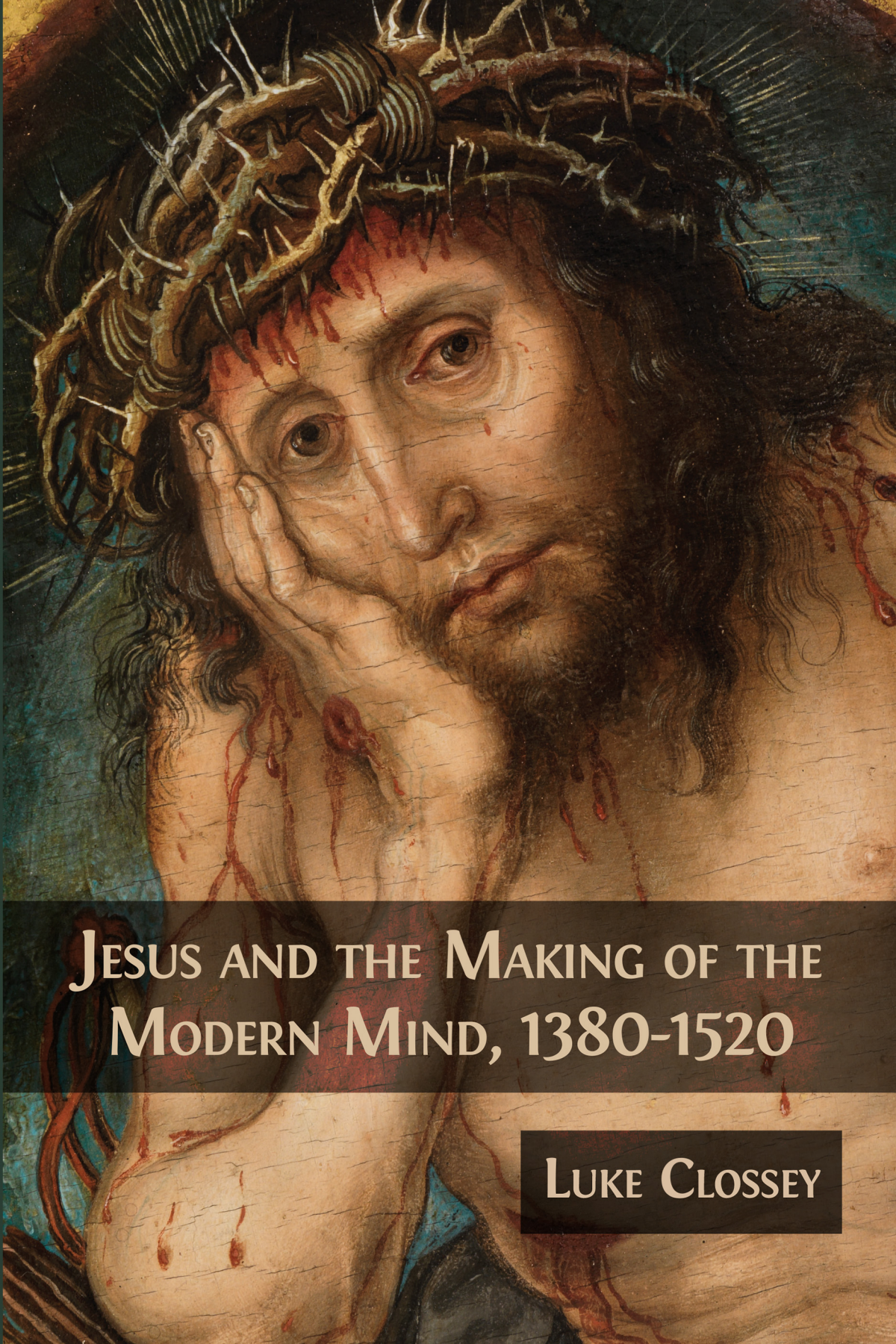

Jesus and the Making of the Modern Mind, 1380-1520

Luke Clossey

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1. The Book in a Nutshell

Fig. 1.1 Prayer Bead with the Adoration of the Magi and the Crucifixion (early sixteenth century), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, public domain, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/464449

In a medieval Irish story, the Ulster princess Ness was about to give birth on the very first Christmas Eve. Her druid companion, who might also have been her lover and/or father, advised her to wait a day so that her son would share a birthday with Jesus. She agreed: "If it do not come out through my side, it shall not come out any other way until that time arrive." Ness waited the day at the side of a river and so gave birth on Christmas. She named the son after the river: Conchobar.

When he was in his twenties, Conchobar mac Nessa, now king of Ulster, narrowly survived being shot by a ball made up of lime mixed with the brains of Mesgegra, king of Leinster. Mesgegra's killer had preserved it as a trophy, which

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was then the custom; warriors could compare their brain-balls to determine bragging rights. Conchobar's physician deemed the ball, lodged two-thirds of the way into the royal skull, too dangerous to remove, and so stitched it up with golden thread and ordered Conchobar to abstain from horse riding, sex, feasting, running, and anger.

Seven years later, an eclipse (or maybe an earthquake) alarmed Conchobar, and a druid or Roman diplomat (variously) explained that Jesus, who shared a birthday with Conchobar, had just been crucified. Conchobar then declared his faith in Jesus, "my foster-brother and coeval." Although regretfully acknowledging that he was not geographically close enough to wage war against the Jews who arranged Jesus's death, Conchobar could not help angrily running into the sea "up to his teeth." As a result, Mesgegra's brains exploded, instantly killing Conchobar. The blood counted as a baptism in the rules of salvation, and, with his earlier pronouncement of faith, Conchobar effectively became a Christian. His soul went to hell, but was quickly rescued by Jesus and thus saved. Conchobar became the first Irishman in heaven.[1]

Fundamentally, this book is a gently curated compilation of ideas, images, and stories from what we loosely call the Jesus "cult." We use that word in its old sense, without any of its current negative connotations, to refer to the people who *cult*-ivated any kind of relationship with Jesus. "Cult" and "cultivate" both come from the Latin "cultus," meaning "nurtured," which could be applied equally to a field or to a god.

Jesus and the Late Traditional World

The issue that first hooked me as a history student was the distance between two mental universes, loosely called "traditional" and "modern." Why do we think differently than they did? Why, for example, does Conchobar's antisemitism endure, when brain-ball bullets have fallen out of use? We might find Conchobar's life "barbaric," but what would he think of us today?

These issues led me to Jesus—not incidentally one of the constants between Conchobar's life and our own. Arguably the most important, enduring figure across the traditional and modern worlds, Jesus has been embedded in the hearts and minds of billions of people worldwide for nearly two millennia. As a result, Jesus's influence and range make him a useful yardstick for measuring modernity.

1 Quotations are from the mid-fifteenth-century *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum*, Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 O 48 (b), fol. 52r ("Is ē sin ēimh," "innti conruigi a fiacui"). The overall summary draws from several manuscripts translated in Kuno Meyer, *The Death-Tales of the Ulster Heroes* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, and Co., 1906), 2–21. See Kuno Meyer, ed., "Irish Miscellanies: Anecdota from the Stowe MS. n° 992," *Revue Celtique* 6 (1883–85): 178–82.

This research agenda also dictated this book's timeframe. I study the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, what most historians call the "Early Modern" world. For me, this is the "Late Traditional." While referring to the same centuries, this new name reframes them on their own terms. Scholars of the Early Modern work hard to unearth bits of modernity, but Late Traditional peoples themselves were surrounded by tradition: rather than striding onto the highway to modernity, they rambled around an anarchy of divergent paths. My previous book's chronology began in 1540, and I am more comfortable in that later period.[2] As I was researching the Late Traditional Jesus, the need to focus on a more restricted timeframe brought me to the fifteenth century, which beckoned precisely because it was so foreign. This is the most recent century where my toes cannot reach the bottom of the pool: I can find a few emotional and rhetorical kindred spirits, but I cannot form a mind meld with anyone. I do not share a basic logic with anyone until the following century.

Fig. 1.2 The Late Traditional World, map by Taf Richards, Arcane Atlas Cartography (@Arcane_Atlas), CC BY-NC.

2 Luke Clossey, *Salvation and Globalization in the Early Jesuit Missions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2008), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511497278

The Late Traditional World centred on a densely populated Asian "Core" (see Fig. 1.1). From Delhi, roughly the global population centre, you could look out towards a less populated "Near West" between the Indus River and the Levant, and beyond that to a peripheral European "Far West" extending to the Atlantic.[3] These "Ploughlands," all fed by plough agriculture, featured extensive networks between cities, especially in the Core. In 1400, the Jesus cult largely corresponded with the scope of these lands; it was densest in the Far and Near Wests, and more socially marginal in the Core. Only a few merchants and colonists brought the Jesus cult with them beyond these Ploughlands, into Greenland and the eastern African coast.

Free of geographic constraints, this study considers its subject from the widest possible perspective. Jesus—when not upstaged by his mother Mary[4]—was central to Christians while also being an important prophet and saint to Muslims. The manuscript treats both the Bible and Qur'an as Jesus-scriptures, and both churches and mosques as Jesus-temples. In far smaller numbers, after centuries of persecution, some in the Asian Core even understood Jesus as part of the Manichaean-Buddhist pantheons. The fifteenth century also saw the Jesus cult beginning to globalize, beyond the Ploughlands and into northernmost Europe, the Americas, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Beyond Christianity and Islam, Jesus came to interact with new peoples as an alien god, and faced complex responses including conversion and resistance.

For simplicity's sake, this book refers to a wide variety of "Jesuses"—from battleships to blood-splattered woodcuts. However, as we will see, not all uses of the name "Jesus" were necessarily meant to refer to the man himself. Conversely, not all "Jesuses" carry that name. Much like how a newlywed who has taken a partner's surname remains, to some degree, a member of their original family, many Jesus examples also acquired new names. In general, efforts have been made to include such hidden crypto-Christs. For example, some characteristics of Jesus drifted east over centuries, eventually becoming associated with beings in the Asian Core. The Buddha Akshobhya, *née* Jesus, is recognized here as a Jesus, even if no local knew his name or this aspect of his history.

3 Beyond the Far West, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas had a far lesser population density and were far more tenuously connected to the Core.

4 The satire *La Desputoison de Dieu et de sa mère*, from about 1400, has Jesus bemoaning his mother's greater importance, such that the most famous churches were dedicated to her. Ernst Langlois, ed., "La Desputoison de Dieu et de sa mère," *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire* 5 (1885): 54–61.

Jesus and the Two Kens

Over the last two decades, a dozen research assistants and I, in the course of field work in fifty countries, have accumulated thousands of images and tens of thousands of text files on Jesus. What to do with all this data? Most importantly, I wanted my argument to "consonate" with the sources, to run with the grain, and to be intelligible and interesting, even if not persuasive, to a Late Traditional person.[5]

Initially, I had planned to let the sources speak for themselves, but I often found myself unable to hear what they were saying. That is, many of these Jesus examples—like Conchobar and his brain-blood baptism—were opaque to my own habitual ways of thinking and feeling. I recognized that I had certain views of how reality works that were interfering with my comprehension of the sources.

We can better understand the making of modern minds by better understanding pre-modern minds. By studying such puzzling examples, I was able to define the precise gaps in my thinking. Two perspectives coalesced: the "deep ken" and the "plain ken." "Ken" is a fossil word referring to the extent of one's knowledge, ability, or vision; it survives in assertions that something is "beyond one's ken." The "deep ken" uncovers meanings and connections—such as between Irish earthquakes and the Crucifixion—that the plain ken denies, discounts, or overlooks. The "plain ken" locates Jesus in a less subtle world, one bound by the modern rules of space and time. Seen with the deep ken, my strange Jesus examples began to make sense; this perspective recovered the intelligence and plausibility of these alien ways of thinking about Jesus. The plain ken's dominance over the deep ken is distinctive of modern minds, but it is also our great obstacle in understanding the logics of the fifteenth century.

As a twenty-first-century Canadian historian, I am most comfortable thinking with the plain ken. Through this framework, I have come to recognize it not as an absolute truth, but as just one of two fundamentally different ways of understanding life. Of course, most people understand different things in different ways; the kens are not mutually exclusive. The theologian Eberhard Waltmann (fl. 1450s) argued that while God could (deep ken) have created Jesus with multiple foreskins, the restrictions of our human universe (plain ken) limited Him to one (see Chapter 9).[6] The deep and plain kens cannot be glossed as "religious" and "secular" perspectives. Since the eighteenth century, and especially today, many Christians have looked out with a plain-ken perspective

5 Luke Clossey, Kyle Jackson, Brandon Marriott, Andrew Redden, and Karin Vélez, "The Unbelieved and Historians, Part I: A Challenge," *History Compass* 14 (2016): 594–602.

6 Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 630b Helmst., fol. 14rv.

onto a world without miracles. Conversely, some atheistic scientists today accept the truth of statements suggesting that the universe has deep-ken purposeful motivations, such as "Trees produce oxygen *so that* animals can breathe."[7] Almost every person examined in this book was religious. Some mostly used the deep ken, others mostly the plain ken. Many shifted between the two depending on the context. The same is true today.

The plain ken is itself a product of history, one that Jesus can help us locate, recognize, and understand. Indeed, the Far West struggled with the challenges of thinking about and with Jesus in this period. Jesus was complex and begged questions. He is at once fully divine and fully human—how do we depict that visually? Four semi-consistent Gospels exist that often contradict the Qur'an—is that human error, in the middle of divine revelation? How do we chant our liturgy in a coherent way that connects Hebrew psalms to the life of Jesus a millennium later? This messiness meant that Jesus might have even been a driving force in the development of the plain ken. Possibly he was not just a coincidental repeat bystander, but a catalyst of change. Before there could be a quest for the historical Jesus, there had to be a quest for history. Before there could be a quest for history, there also had to be a plain ken that saw the universe historically.

The Two Kens between Traditional and Modern

The ubiquity of Jesus in the fifteenth-century world means that a comprehensive study of his cult criss-crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries. In the Far West, scripture, art, ethics, and music were all tentatively reorienting themselves towards the plain ken. This book deduces the deep ken, and catalogues the rise of the plain ken, in a wide range of subjects, especially in visual arts and textual scholarship, but also in abstract subjects like theology and music, and more earthy subjects like sex and bowling. The funky geometry of pre-Renaissance art reflects the funky chronology of the pre-Renaissance exegetes, for example, who identified Jesus as both preceding and succeeding Moses. Neither art nor exegesis remains funky when viewed with the deep ken. Plain-ken artists located Biblical narratives in visual spacetime even as plain-ken scholars located them in historical spacetime.

This approach reworks the usual modernization narrative that was once of paramount interest to historians. Even as it has become a rather neglected debate, this narrative still remains implicit, omnipresent, and influential, for example in our periodization. The phrase "shift towards plain ken," for instance, is more

7 Deborah Kelemen, Joshua Rottman, and Rebecca Seston, "Professional Physical Scientists Display Tenacious Teleological Tendencies," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 142 (2013): 1074–83.

precise and more neutral than the phrase "modernization." The emphasis is placed not on the transition from medieval to modern, but rather on a shift in balance—from a multifaceted mind *more* dominated by the deep ken to a mind *more* dominated by the plain ken. The book is not a statistical study, but this claim is an impression based on having worked with thousands of Jesus examples, many of which people the chapters to come. As a new framework, the kens avoid the implications our prejudices have associated with "traditional" and "modern," especially the sense that one is better than the other. They do not map onto concepts used by previous historians as indices of modernity but do connect with them in varied ways (see Appendix A).

This shift occurred in a world where some societies had already experimented with the plain ken. The Far West was neither precocious nor extraordinary. Tenth-century Chinese artists used the plain-ken to develop the photorealistic, plain-ken "linear perspective" before rejecting it in favour of more abstract deep-ken modes. The Far West eventually developed it four hundred years later and made the opposite choice (see Chapter 14). In China, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) was aware of a plain-ken approach among Confucian scholars, but was unimpressed: "All they did was look things up in texts; they did not understand it for themselves; they did not come to understand that the sages' sayings were inside them." Indeed, Zhu Xi thought Confucius's genius lay in removing the ugly corruptions from the texts he edited to create a canon applicable to readers throughout history.[8] His rival Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139–92) refused to deface the Six Classics with plain-ken footnotes about the history of language; instead, he wrote, "the Six Classics annotate me."[9] Even in the Near West, Islam had partly shifted towards the plain ken in textual scholarship long before Europe. From the Core, Asian perspective, the Far West plain-ken advance was a step backwards; from the Near West, Islamic perspective, it came centuries late. The above re-oriented map helps us see that this story need not be about Europe treading some new, pioneering path towards modernity. In some important ways, the Renaissance was a lateral step, or from the Core perspective even a backwards step, and a catching-up. This book is a defense of the non-West and the non-modern, not by asserting their almost-equivalence with the West and the modern, but by pointing out that the West rewrote, to its own advantage, the scales we use to evaluate societal progress.

8 朱熹, 朱子語類, ed. 黎靖德 and 王星賢 (Beijing: 中华书局, 1986), 181: "亦只是一向去書册上求,不就自家身上理會。自家見未到,聖人先說在那裏。"

9 陸九淵, 陸象山全集 (n.p.: 金谿槐堂, 1823), XXXIV, 7: "六經註我我註六經." See John B. Henderson, *Scripture, Canon and Commentary: A Comparison of Confucian and Western Exegesis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991), 10, 28, 60; Lianbin Dai, "From Philology to Philosophy: Zhu Xi as a Reader-annotator," in *Canonical Texts and Scholarly Practices: A Global Comparative Approach*, ed. Anthony Grafton and Glenn W. Most (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2016), 136–63.

How to Read This Book

This overview is intended to efficiently give you a sense of the book and its possibilities. Written for multiple audiences, it assumes no expertise in any particular aspect of religious or fifteenth-century history. It is difficult to predict what brought you to the book, and what background and expectations came with you.

If your interests tend towards modern and traditional ways of thinking, you can read this book as making an argument: we can use the deep and plain kens to engage meaningfully with multiple fields of human activity, as demonstrated by Jesus-centric case studies from the fifteenth century. The kens, briefly introduced here, are more fully presented in Chapter 2, with additional appendices giving further theoretical background. Later chapters contain a variety of Jesus-centric examples to illustrate how the kens can be used; the more you read, the more prepared you will be to further develop them as a framework, either for scholarship or your day-to-day life.

Two introductory chapters tour the history of the development of the Christian, Muslim, and Manichaean perspectives on Jesus (Chapter 3) and the variety of available Jesus sources from the long fifteenth century (Chapter 4). Three "Spaces" chapters explore places linked in various ways to Jesus (Chapter 5), the frontiers between Muslims and Christians in Anatolia, and between Christians and Jews in Iberia (Chapter 6), and the Jesus cult's expansion into the margins of Eurasia and beyond (Chapter 7). In the "Tangibles" section, the materiality of Jesus links chapters on the power of relics and other objects (Chapter 8), the Eucharist's edible Jesus and its liturgical context (Chapter 9), and Bibles and Qur'ans as physical things (Chapter 10). Shifting from the material to the mental, the "Ideas" section looks at how scholars interpreted those scriptures (Chapter 11), how difficult Jesus-problems made them relax their rules of knowledge (Chapter 12), and how the most prominent of these scholars, Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64), engaged with the idea of Jesus (Chapter 13). Three "Sights" chapters address the visual, considering how art oriented itself towards the deep (Chapter 14) and plain (Chapter 15) kens before examining a series of extraordinary Jesus images (Chapter 16). Turning towards the audible, a pair of "Sounds" chapters discuss the theory, practice, and power of language (Chapter 17) and elevated forms of speech and music (Chapter 18). The final "Orientations" section looks to people who modelled themselves on Jesus, or found Jesus-resemblance in others (Chapter 19), who cultivated an intimacy with him (Chapter 20), and who followed ethical guidelines extrapolated from his words and deeds (Chapter 21). Using sight, sound, touch, and thought as organizing principles underlines Jesus's ubiquity in fifteenth-century life.

To help facilitate your exploration, the book ends with a glossary of new and important terms (Glossary), a short list of recent scholarship that has most informed this research (Select Bibliography), a list of manuscripts consulted (List of Manuscripts), and a general index (Index). Each source is fully cited in each chapter in which it is used.

Quotations from English sources have been modernized. Bible references use the New International Version; Qur'an citations refer to M. A. S. Abdel Haleem's translation.[10] I sometimes loosely refer to something as "plain ken" or "deep ken" to indicate its orientation towards that ken; strictly speaking, the kens themselves are the ways of viewing, not the things viewed. Transliterations have favoured accessibility and legibility over precision and consistency; certain key words are also given in the original. All translations are my own, unless otherwise specified. Readers keen to submerge deeper into the fifteenth century can follow the footnotes down into that wondrous abyss.

10 *The Qur'an*, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004).