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## **A Messiah Modern as Tomorrow's Eggbeater: Jesus Christs**

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Christian theologian rather than an existentialist philosopher. Bultmann may have tended to let the historical event of Christianity become absorbed in the "eschatological occurrence." Nacpil points out, however, that faith is a kind of knowing even if it does not fit the canons of language analysis.

*Time* magazine has recently listed the ecumenical movement as one of today's outstanding bores. Here in the Philippines ecumenical activity cannot yet be said to have earned that distinction. There have been occasional meetings and an infrequent picketing of the American embassy, but theological exchanges such as represented in this volume have thus far been rare. One hopes that the windows might be opened at least a few inches more.

JOSEPH O'HARE, S.J.

## A MESSIAH MODERN AS TOMORROW'S EGGBEATER

JESUS CHRISTS. By A. J. Langguth. New York: Harper & Row, 1968. 227 pp.

A book out of the ordinary, this first novel of A. J. Langguth brushes the cobwebs off the Jesus story. For the novel is concerned with what customarily is dealt with in a staid, orthodox, frequently nondescript manner. The Jesus story has its adherents; this one is portrayed, in episodes or perhaps, in related prize fragments. Mr. Langguth tells the story as though he knew it like the cup of his hand. This is a revealing form of intimacy.

What in other hands would emerge as a story whose emotional impact and intellectual overtones derive solidly from a chronological ordering of what is biblically known, is in Langguth's winning way spun from a central vision. Step by step the novel jells into a cogent whole by sticking to historic or imagined episodes. The point is not that we agree with Langguth's vision or endorse his manner. His fictional art emerges with authority, and the result is fascinating.

One does not get here the monolithic effect; rather, one is treated to an intimate kaleidoscope of the real Christ, quite indifferent to honors; sharply conscious of discomforts; human as an abscess. The opening is a well-patterned mosaic of material on Christ in his seemingly endless endeavors to project his mission. He is the essential Jesus, grappling with a hirsute Satan; responsive to the individualism of his Apostles' problems; aware of the needs of the ordinary human. On this episodic basis, the story proceeds slowly and purposefully,

from an imagined brush with James, Andrew and Thomas who respond with wants preposterously mundane; to the brief encounter with the seventeen-year-old Nathanael, illuminating Jesus' interest in Godhead; to the finely projected instructions in Jesus-ness in a manila envelope.

An extended self-illuminating passage told by a narrator "I" (the apostle John) follows, centering on the delightful Cana event, and featuring a tranquil yet logical Mary; the happening about the wine; and Jesus' thoughts on earthly, and divine, success. To students of the early Jesus this would be most welcome for the piercing insights both into himself and into Mary. People accustomed to the divine perfections of mother and Son will be jolted, for both are pathologically besmirched in themselves and in their social relationships. At this point the book sounds nakedly honest, astonishingly brutal, quite unlike anything we already know and venerate in the biblical epic. (Peter is stoned to death and resurrects; Jesus owns a flashy convertible presented by a grateful flock; uses a pocket knife to fix his tires; steals money, goes to the coast where on the beach he rents a room and sleeps soundly for a week; is a drunk who exists on the dregs of an uncle's bequest.)

This is a modern, streamlined Jesus who, in a telling document confesses his hatred of human creatures, painfully matching the details of his odium with outlined outrages. It is no secret that this Christ failed, more because he knew about being just himself, than for other compulsive reasons. He makes no attempt at being different. He traces a life made significant by paradoxical faults than by virtues, a man important to people because he is exactly what he should not be, weak, indifferent, lost. A Biblical devotee would hardly recognize this Messiah figure.

Author Langguth permits himself to comment concerning the human race: as in the case of the Palestinian coins to be dumped into the Red Sea, that men are pernicious because those in charge of the money would keep it. When Jesus is taken in tow as a prisoner, the extended red tape implies the stewed corruption of a bureaucrat ill-suited to his job. Completely significant, the guard chooses to tell the truth:

The guilt you have managed to breed in any man or woman or child fool enough to give you a hearing. The guilt and sense of failure that you've raised to a level of perfection that has never been matched. You've found a way to strike at even the best men — if they live a blameless life, you condemn them for their thoughts. It was your God that shackled men to their lusts. Then knowing they couldn't change, you came to demand that they free themselves.

Peter has been martyred and resurrects. Here he conducts an investigation of the minister driving a car. In a tantrum, Jesus slashes the right rear tire and punctures the tube. The minister must now walk, for as Jesus says, "There are rules for God's house and for God's messengers." Later to Peter with unshakable cool, "I'd ask you to remember that tolerance is the passion of the different," and "I can remind myself that the fury of a spurned God burns, however dimly in my breast. I can remind myself that in an age of thin, swinish love I must hate the lame who lack the faith to rise."

These things Christ does, apparently with calm, and these things are quite revealing. Peter wonders whether without contributing to scandal, Jesus will reimburse the minister. Part-time child that he is, Jesus does things as a child: the episode with the squirrels, woodchucks and thrushes when he builds a log cabin in the woods; the many last suppers he serves at the end of which he asks the pointed question of pleasure to those who survive; the idea about his bulky sandals, all of which, and many more, point to the unspeakable child in him.

To sustain the matter, Jesus steals several thousand small bills after a collection at one of his sermons. He argues: he's tired, the men aren't good, Mary perpetually scolds. The money isn't anything he wants but he goes out, has a nice dinner and now figures he could buy everybody a little keepsake.

In a brief confessional tract, the words well-articulated in his head and actually written down but destroyed, Jesus shows unaccustomed hatred, malice and violence towards unidentified human beings; he calls them ferrets and hyenas and he would:

...walk through their ranks with a heavy blade, severing their heads from their arms and slashing their bellies to their groins. I would spare no one. I would cut away their rancid sex and the fingers they have used to play those dripping tubes and holes. I would skim open the tops of their heads, trail my fingers through the soup of their brains and throw down the lid again as workmen cover an open sewer... I could slice away, for pigs to feed upon, their meaty joints and ripe inner thighs. When I was done, they would stand before me, all flesh cut away, their bones glistening through blood and scraps of skin, their skulls open and their clutching bowels ready finally to receive. Then I could love them. My God, how I could love them then.

This is a perverse, or perverted, love. Hatred, malice and violence go by no other words than by those which breed misery, bloodshed and needless longing. And a salesgirl's rudeness in a department store

is merely a parody of the type of attitude one associates with being Christ-like. The hubbub and furor which greet His resurrection are politely brushed away and a humorless Jesus demands instant explanation. Delightfully, the novel carries an unedited transcript of the proceedings of a legislative factfinding and resolution committee which "would prohibit all scientific experimentation on human reproduction and would provide penalties for interference, through pills, injections, machine rays or other means, with an unborn child's intelligence, physique or character." The sex deal is called the Unnatural Act. Ribald fun co-exists with all types of precise wording, snaky attitudinizing and plain irreverence. Jesus here is the principal witness who expounds Christian doctrine forcefully and with triumph, one of the salient points being the ruling out of monstrosities from the human womb. A touch of sweet irony colors Jesus' statements; he has an ability for airy lightness just as he too can be grave. A real Bleep orders the creation of human beings, but he is indifferent and would not introduce improvements in the human foetus. These flaws make for the unholy variations in birth and have brought the chairman, committee and chief witness together for a searching session.

In point of chronology, the account of Magdalene's death-by-accident occurring before an extended narration of her sluttish wants and Mata Hari activities during guerrilla war with the alien enemy is hard to take, unless this is supposed, in part, to be an impressionist's paradise; I find this indeed remarkable. Otherwise, Magdalene is most credible and warm, she satisfies the norms of verisimilitude. Philip's whispered advances to the girl and Judas' honest reaction; the Magdalene's adroit sketching with her toe on clean sand of the enemy's positions, and her listing of the enemy's assets and liabilities and plans for counterattack, are leaved from life, even as her handling of the damp hair which falls from her head like seaweed, sounds like something out of a military dossier.

And the community established by the Apostles, with Martha keeping house and the congregation (or nest) together is a feat of realism and controlled understatement. The novel is palpably excellent. Out of the destruction, by burning, comes this portrait of departmental magnificence, this is living on the level of humanity's finest knowledge. Martha housekeeps and distantly falls in love with Jesus; Peter adores Martha, asks Andrew to turn off the loudspeaker so he can't eavesdrop; this same Peter, out of earshot, frankly discusses with Martha not prices, though both are practical but the mechanics of staying and sticking it out with Jesus or leaving. Thaddeus presents his ailments and the cures he's been following; then follow the domesticity of eating and inconsequential talk, interspersed with plangent memories.

The style is simplicity made flesh. Mr. Langguth makes a sentence spin compositionally. Not only does his way of saying things reduce person, place and/or situation to the unforgettable but his manner of communicating New Testament wisdom, facile. This book is well recommended to teachers and students of both freshman composition and creative writing.

This is a modern-day Christ, put together not so much by reverence or orthodoxy as by wit or perhaps by a wilful desire to startle. Langguth will have no part of monuments or their perpetuation. He is not cowed by tradition; neither will he contribute to a growing list of boring reading. The facets or aspects we know are served here on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. We realize and accept Langguth's insistence that Christ lived and died like us, and the introduction of streetcars, nuns, motorcars, gunfire, hospitals and sessions with cashew nuts makes this novel terribly and beautifully universal.

VALDEMAR O. OLAGUER

## HAIL THE BRIGHT PUPPETS

A FAIRLY HONOURABLE DEFEAT. By Iris Murdoch. New York: The Viking Press, 1970. 426 pp.

An inexhaustible mine in the pyrotechnics, lusts and infinite variations of love, Iris Murdoch has created still another world of physical and mental desire. It is a world of her own making; one that is perhaps quite unique to her. Like all universes privately endowed and just as individually arranged, this one sticks to, and submits to laws legislated and defended by their creator. And it is a closed private world in England, chilling and bizarre.

Bright sexual (and intellectual?) unions project their permanence at curtain-rise: Rupert and Hilda heterosexual, Tallis and Morgan, heterosexual, but divorced. Into this farce wanders Julius King willy-nilly, a sane but devious device of his own manipulation, content only to breed chaos and confusion where benignity and order once reigned. There is a devilry in Julius which Iris Murdoch condones and wills to be sovereign. He is the instrument of bliss and torment, the implacable god who thinks, wills and executes, always to his own glee and honor.

What King knows and perhaps cherishes is an affair culminating in wilfull abortion, with Morgan in America, where she has found sanctuary in a South Carolina college. She fled from Tallis whose