

Will the *real* Jesus please stand up?

For Christ's Sake
Tom Harpur
Oxford University Press

by Shaun Cody

Tom Harpur's latest book, *For Christ's Sake*, has drawn fire from all sides of the theological community. In the book, Harpur examines the traditional views of the historical Jesus and criticizes many existing misconceptions about his ministry.

At the beginning of *For Christ's Sake*, Harpur compares Christianity to a stream in a desert around which some pilgrims build walls.

"Now, as time went on, various people began to roll up boulders around the spring as monuments of gratitude. As the generations and centuries passed, these monuments become more elaborate and ornate until at last the spring was totally enclosed, arched over by a great fortress-like cathedral and protected by high stone walls. A special caste of men, with special robes and a language all their own, came into being to set rules for preserving the purity of the well. Access was no longer free to all, and disagreements as to who could drink there, and when, and how, sometimes grew so bitter wars were fought over them."

The stream in the desert is the actual gospel of the historical Jesus while the walls and monuments are the artifices of organized religion. Harpur appoints himself as the modern day Joshua, responsible for removing the obstructions man has built around the stream.

Harpur, a former Anglican priest and former religion editor of the *Toronto Star*, notes "It is the contention of this book that Jesus had a divine mission to tear away all the blocks and hinderances standing in the way of humanity's thirst for the water of life."

Harpur feels that the structured and often doctrinarian and dogmatic nature of organized Christianity isolates many people from the good news proclaimed by Jesus. Instead of restating past theology, Harpur launched into an examination of the historical Jesus and his message. Harpur rejects many of the traditional views of Christianity: the Trinity, Jesus's divinity, the Virgin Birth, Jesus's moral perfection and Jesus transcendence of humanity.

Harpur writes that the word Christ means "the anointed agent of God" but does not feel this implies that Jesus was a divine being. He views Jesus not as Christ but as a divinely inspired human being, with faults and weaknesses, proclaiming a wonderful message of hope. Harpur goes as far to say that Jesus was just another prophet, along the lines of Elijah or Moses.

A key problem in getting to know Christ, Harpur told the *Gateway*, is interpreting the Bible.

"You have to interpret the Bible in terms of itself. What was the writer saying? In what context was he speaking? Today's fundamentalists read the Bible in a contemporary context. They tend to use it to support a personal bias or whim. It has given tremendous legitimacy to violence of all types, right down to the TV and right-wing evangelists saying nuclear war is divinely vengeant of God.

"The opinion that Jesus was God walking around was not a view he had of himself. He would have seen it as blasphemous. Jesus called himself the Son of Man. You can't find him referred to as the Son of God in the early Gospels. Jesus has a strong identity with humanity.

"When Jesus calls God 'Father', we're dealing with imagery," said Harpur. "To me, it denotes a deep sense of relationship. Remember, Jesus often said that we are all sons of God. He understood that to mean we are all children of God."

Harpur attacked cherished concepts held by many Christians. Nothing is sacred to Harpur.

Religion is the name we give to man's attempt to manipulate God. Jesus came to abolish religion religiously. For me, religion is not a very nice word."

Although Harpur questions Jesus's divinity and many tenets of modern Christianity, he still considers himself a Christian. "To call yourself a Christian, does that mean you are a follower of Jesus? If it means that, then I consider myself a Christian."

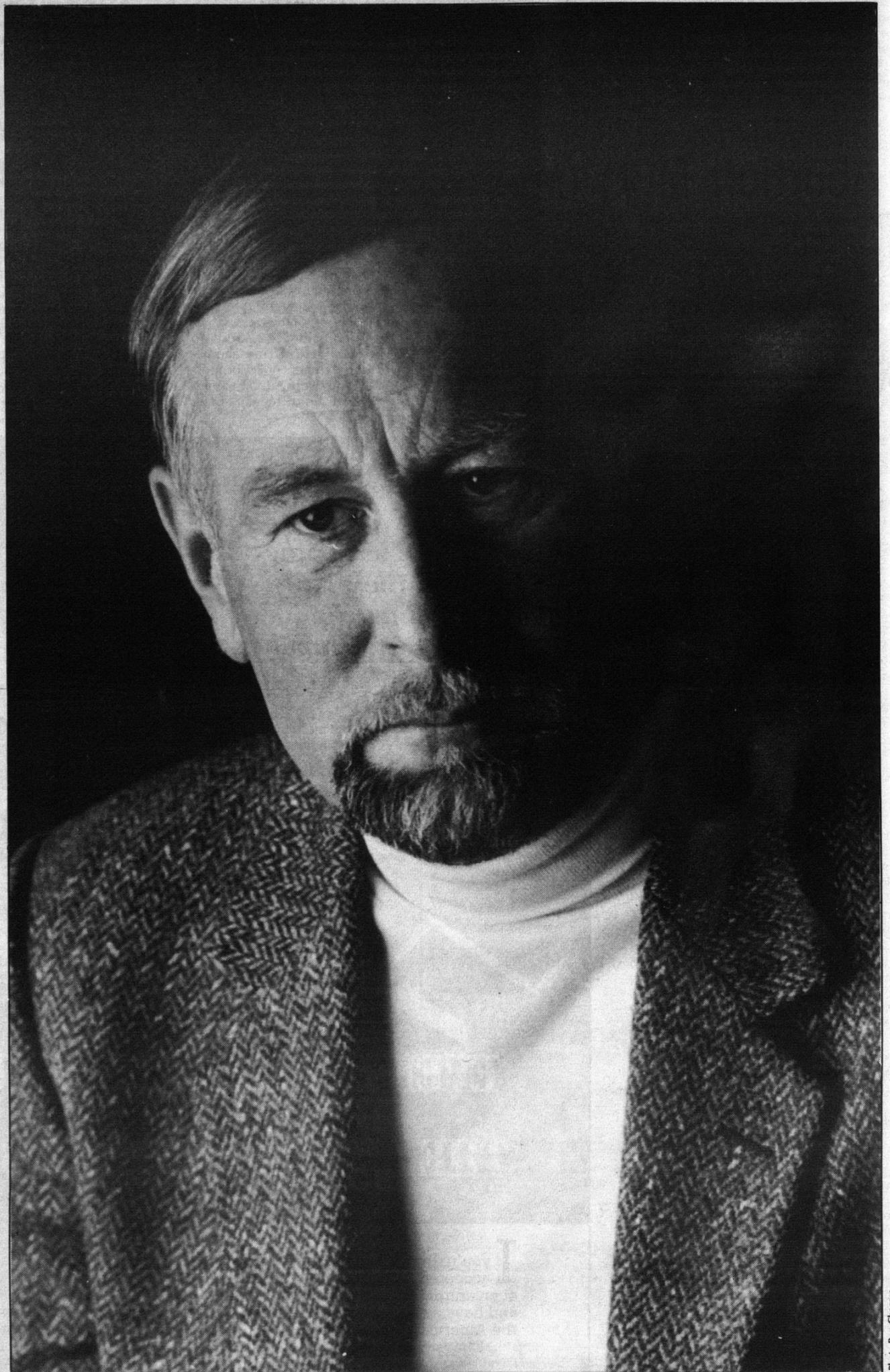


Photo: Ron Chccora

"The horrors of the Crusades and the notorious Inquisition are but a small part of the appalling intolerance and violence perpetrated down the centuries against those outside the Christian fold. Though it has taken decades since the event, Christian theologians now recognize the full extend of Christian complicity in the Holocaust of roughly six million Jews by the Nazis."