

THE STORY OF CHRIST

BY GIOVANNI PAPINI
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INTRODUCTION

For five hundred years those who call themselves free spirits because they prefer prison life to army service have been trying desperately to kill Jesus a second time—to kill Him in the hearts of men.

The army of His enemies assembled to bury Him as soon as they thought they heard the death-rattle of Christ's second death. Presumptuous donkeys mistaking libraries for their stables, top-heavy brains pretending to explore the highest heavens in philosophy's drifting balloon, professors poisoned by the fatal strong drink of philology and metaphysics, armed themselves. Paraphrasing the rallying-cry of Peter the Hermit to the crusaders, they shouted "Man wills it!" as they set out on their crusade against the Cross. Certain of them drew on their boundless imaginations to evolve what they considered proof positive of a fantastic theory that the story of the Gospel is no more than a legend from which we can reconstruct the natural life of Jesus as a man, one-third prophet, one-third necromancer, one-third demagogue, a man who wrought no miracles except the hypnotic cure of some obsessed devotees, who did not die on the cross, but came to Himself in the chill of the sepulcher and reappeared with mysterious airs to delude men into believing that He had risen from the dead.

Others demonstrated as certainly as two and two make four that Jesus was a myth developed in the time of Augustus and of Tiberius, and that all the Gospels can be reduced to a clumsy mosaic of prophetic texts. Others conceived of Jesus as a good, well-meaning man, but too high-flown and fantastic, who went to school to the Greeks, the Buddhists, and the Essenes and patched together His plagiarisms as best He could to support His claim to be the Messiah of Israel. Others made Him out to be an unbalanced humanitarian, precursor of Rousseau and of divine democracy; an excellent man for his time but who today would be put under the care of an alienist. Others to get rid of the subject once for all took up the idea of the myth again, and by dint of puzzlings and comparisons concluded that Jesus never was born anywhere in any spot on the globe.

But who could have taken the place of the man they were trying to dispose of? The grave they dug was deeper every day, and still they could not bury Him from sight. Then began the manufacture of religions for the irreligious. During the whole of the nineteenth century they were turned out in couples and half dozens at a time; the religion of Truth, of the Spirit, of the Frolic, of the Hero, of the Humanity, of Nationalism, of Imperialism, of Reason, of Beauty, of Peace, of Sorrow, of Pity, of the Ego, of the Future and so on. Some were only new arrangements of Christianity, uncrowned, spineless Christianity, Christianity without God; most of them were political, or philosophic, trying to make themselves out mystics. But faithful followers of these religions were few and their ardor faint. Such frozen abstractions, although sometimes helped along by social interest or literary passions, did not fill the hearts which had renounced Jesus.

Then attempts were made to throw together facsimiles of religion which would make a better job of offering what men looked for in religion. Free-Masons, Spiritualists, Theosophists, Occultists, Scientists, professed to have found the infallible substitute for Christianity. But such mixtures of moldy superstition and worm-eaten necromancy, such a hash of musty rationalism and science gone bad, of simian symbolism and humanitarianism turned sour, such unskillful rearrangements of Buddhism, manufactured-for-export, and of betrayed Christianity, contented some thousands of leisure-class women, and went no further.

In the meantime, partly in a German paragonage and partly in a professor's chair in Switzerland, the last anti-Christ was making ready. "Jesus," he said, coming down from the Alps in the sunshine, "Jesus mortified mankind; sin is beautiful, violence is beautiful. Everything that says 'yes' to Life is beautiful." And Zarathustra, after having thrown into the Mediterranean the Greek texts of Leibniz and the works of Machiavelli, began to gambol at the feet of the statue of Dionysius with the grace that might be expected of a German, born of a Lutheran minister, who had just stepped down from a chair in a Swiss University. But, although his songs were sweet to the ear, he never succeeded in explaining exactly what he meant when he spoke of this adorable "Life" to which men should sacrifice such a living part of themselves as their need to repress their own animal instincts: nor could he ever say in what way Christ, the true Christ of the Gospels, opposed Himself to life. He who wanted to make life higher and happy. And the poor syphilitic anti-Christ, when insanity was close upon him, signed his last letter, "The Crucified One."

And still Christ is not yet expelled from the earth either by the ravages of time or by the efforts of men. His memory is everywhere; on the walls of the churches and the schools, on the tops of bell-towers and of mountains, in street-shrines, at the heads of beds and over tombs, thousands of crosses bring to mind the death of the Crucified One. Take away the frescoes from the churches, carry off the pictures from the altars and from the houses, and the life of Christ fills museums and picture-galleries. Throw away breviaries and missals, and you find His name and His words in all the books of literature. Even oaths are an involuntary remembrance of His presence.

When all is said and done, Christ is an end and a beginning, an abyss of divine mystery between two divisions of human history. Paganism and Christianity can never be welded together. Before Christ and After Christ! Our era, our civilization, our life, begins with the birth of Christ. We can seek out what comes before Christ, we can acquire information about it, but it is no longer ours, it is signed with other signs, limited by other systems, no longer moves our passions; it may be beautiful, but it is dead. Caesar was more talked about in his time than Jesus, and Plato taught more science than Christ. People still discuss the Roman ruler and the Greek philosopher, but who nowadays is hotly for Caesar or against him; and where now are the Platonists and the anti-Platonists?

Christ, on the contrary, is still living among us. There are still people who love Him and who hate Him. There is a passion for the love of Christ and a passion for His destruction. The fury of so many against Him is a proof that He is not dead. The very people who devote themselves to denying His ideas and His existence pass their lives in bringing His name to memory.

We live in the Christian era, and it is not yet finished. If we are to understand the world of our life, ourselves, we must refer to Christ. Every age must re-write its own Gospel. More than any other, our own age has so re-written its own Gospel, and therefore the author ought perhaps to justify himself for having written this book. But the justification, if there is need of such, will be plain to those who read it.

There never was a time more cut off from Christ than ours, nor one which needed Him more. But to find Him, the old books are not enough. No life of Christ, even if it were written by an author of greater genius than any who has ever lived, could be more beautiful and perfect than the Gospels. The candid sobriety of the first four stories can never be improved upon by any miracle of style and poetry. And we can add very little to the information they give us. But who reads the Gospels nowadays? And who could read them, even if he set himself at it. Glosses of philologists, comments of the exegetical experts, varying readings of erudite marginal editors, emendations of letters, such things can provide entertainment for patient brains. But the heart needs something more than this.

Every generation has its preoccupations and its thoughts, and its own insanities. The old Gospels must be re-translated for the help of the lost. If Christ is to remain alive in the life of men, eternally present with us, it is absolutely necessary to resuscitate Him from time to time; not to color Him with the dyes of the present day, but to present with new words, with references to things now happening, His eternal truth and His never-changing story. The world is full of such bookish resuscitations of Christ, learned or literary; but it seems to the author of this one that many are forgotten, and others are not suitable. To write the history of the stories of Christ would take another book and one even longer than this one. But it is easy to divide into two great divisions those which are best known and most read: (1) Those written by orthodox authors for the use of the orthodox; (2) and those written by scientists for the use of non-believers. Neither the first nor the second can satisfy those who are seeking in such lives for Life.

The lives of Jesus written for pious readers exhale, almost all of them, a sort of withered mustiness, the very first page of which repels readers used to more delicate and substantial fare. There is an odor of burnt-out lamp-wick, a smell of stale incense and of rancid oil that sticks in the throat. You cannot draw a long, free breath. The reader acquainted with the biographies of great men written with greatness and possessing some notions of his own about the art of writing and of poetry, who incautiously picks up one of these pious books, feels his heart fall as he advances into this flabby prose, torpid, tangled, patched up with commonplace that were alive a thousand years ago, but which are now dead and petrified. It is even worse when these worn-out old hacks try to break into the lyric gallop or the trot of eloquence. Their faded graces, their ornaments of countrified purisms, of "fine writing" fit for provincial academies, their artificial warmth cooled down to tepidity by unctuous dignity, discourage the endurance

of the holdest reader. And when they are not enlivened in the thorny mysteries of scholasticism, they fall into the roaring eloquence of the Sunday sermon. In short, these are books written for readers who believe in Jesus, that is, for those who could, in a way, get along without them. But ordinary people, indifferent people, irreverent people, artists, those accustomed to the greatness of Antiquity and to the novelty of Modernity, never look at even the best of such volumes; or if they pick them up, let them fall at once. And yet these are the very people whom such a book should win because they are those whom Christ has lost, they are those who today form public opinion and count in the world.

Another sort of books, those written by the learned men for the neutrals, succeed even less in turning towards Christ the souls that have not learned the way to Christianity. In the first place they almost never have any intention of doing this, and in the second place they themselves, almost all of them, are among those who ought to be brought back to the true and living Christ. Furthermore, their method which is, as they say, historical, scientific, critical, leads them to pause over texts and external facts, to establish them or to eliminate them, rather than to consider their meaning and the value and the light which, if they would, they could find in those texts and those facts. Most of them try to find the man in the God, the actual external facts of the miracles, the legend in the tradition and, above all, they are on the look-out for interpolations, for falsifications and apocryphs in the first part of Christian literature. Those who do not go so far as to deny that Jesus ever lived, take away from the testimony about Him everything they can, and by dint of "ifs" and "buts" and doubts and hypotheses, so far from writing any definite story themselves, succeed in spoiling the story contained in the Gospels. In short, such historians with all their confusion of fret-work and bunglings, with all the resources of textual criticism, of mythology, of paleography, of archeology, of Greek and Hebrew philology, only triturate and liquefy the simple life of Christ. The most logical conclusion to draw from their rambling incoherent talk is that Jesus never did appear on the earth, or if by chance He really did appear, that we know nothing certain about His life. Christianity still exists, of course, in spite of such conclusions, but Christianity is a fact not easily disregarded. To offset this fact the best these enemies of Christ can do is to search through the Orient and Occident for the origins, as they say, of Christianity, their intention being quite openly to parcel it out among its predecessors, Jewish, Greek, for that matter Hindu and Chinese, as if to say: "You see, your Jesus at bottom was not only a man, but a poor specimen of a man, since he said nothing that the human race did not know by heart before his day."

One might ask these deniers of miracles how they explain the miracle of a syncretism of old traditions which has grown about the memory of an obscure plagiarist, an immense movement of men, of thoughts, of institutions, so strong, overwhelmingly strong, as to change the face of the earth for centuries. But this question, and many others, we will not put to them, at least for the present.

In short, when in looking for light we pass from the bad taste of the devotional compilers to the writers who monopolize "historic truth" we fall from pietistic boredom into sterile confusion. The pious writers are unable to lead men to Christ, and the "historians" lose Him in controversy. And neither one nor the other tempt men to read. They may differ from each other in matters of fact, but they resemble each other in the uncouthness of their style. And it is this uncouthness, insulting even to cultivated minds, even superficially acquainted with the divine idyll and divine tragedy of the Gospels, as is the coldheartedness of learned writers. So true is all this that even today, after the passage of so many years, after so many changes of taste and opinion, the only life of Jesus which is read by many lay readers is that of the apostate priest, Renan, a book which all true Christians dislike for its dilettante attitude, insulting even in praise, and which every real historian distrusts because of its compromises and its insufficient scholarship. But although this book of Renan's seems written by a skeptical romancer, wedded to philology, or by a Semitic scholar suffering from literary nostalgia, it has the merits of being really "written," that is, of getting itself read, even by those who are neither believers nor specialists.

To make itself readily read is not the only value nor the greatest which a book can have, and the writer who contents himself with that alone and who thinks of nothing else shows that vanity rather than ardor is his motive power. But let us admit that to be readable is a merit and not a small merit for a book, especially when it is not intended as a tool for study, but when it aims at the mark called, "moving the emotions," or to give it its real name, when its aim is to "transform human beings."

The author of the present book finds—and if he is mistaken he will be very glad to be convinced by any one who sees more clearly than he—that in the thousands of books which tell the story of Jesus, there is not one which seeks, instead of dogmatic proofs and learned discussions, to give food fit for the soul, for the needs of men of our time.

The book we need is a living book, to make Christ more living, to set Christ the Ever-Living with loving vividness before the eyes of living men, to make us feel Him as actually and eternally present in our lives. We need a book which would show Him in all His living and present greatness—perennial and yet belonging intimately to us moderns—to those who have scorned and refused Him, to those who do not love Him because they have never seen His true face; which would show how much there is of supernatural and symbolic in the human, obscure, simple and humble beginning of His life, and how much familiar humanity, how much simple-hearted plainness shines out when He becomes a Heavenly Deliverer at the end of His life, when He becomes a martyr and rises again divinely from the dead.

We need a book which would show in that tragic epic, written by both heaven and earth, the many teachings suited to our time and to our life, which can be found there, not only in what Christ said, but in the very succession of events which begin in the stable at Bethlehem and end in the cloud over Bethany. A book written by a layman for the laymen who are not Christians or who are only superficially Christians, a book without the affectations of professional literature, and without the insipidity of scientific literature, called "scientific" only because it perpetually fears to make the slightest affirmation. A book, in short, written by a modern writer who respects and understands his art, and knows how to hold the attention even of the hostile.

TO BE CONTINUED

CIRCULATING CATHOLIC LIBRARY

Cincinnati, O., May 16.—Father F. J. Finn, S. J., author of many books for juveniles, has launched a movement here for wider reading of Catholic books, which is expected to become nation-wide. He has founded the "Little Flower Library" to promote the project, and already has enlisted several founders. The movement at present is confined to Greater Cincinnati, where it will be conducted as an experiment, for the time being. The plan is to send to Catholic churches or centers, free of charge except the cost of carriage, books to the number of ten at a time. Pastors, directors of parochial schools, heads of Catholic organizations or other responsible Catholics may send for and receive the volumes, without making a deposit or going through any other formalities. Already 200 copies each of 100 books by Catholic authors, a total of 2,000 volumes, have been acquired, at a cost of \$1,800, through subscriptions. Among those who have taken out perpetual memberships in the "Little Flower Library" thus far are the Right Rev. Mgr. Francis C. Kelly, founder of the Catholic Church Extension Society; Warren Carter, a director of that organization, and Richmond P. Dean, head of the Pullman Company.

Father Finn believes there is now an adequate number of Catholic books for such a project.



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