
MALACHI MARTIN

JESUS NOW



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About the Author

Malachi Martin, a former Jesuit professor at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, was trained in theology at Louvain, specializing in the Dead Sea Scrolls and intertestamentary studies. He received his doctorate in Semitic languages, archeology, and Oriental history. He subsequently studied at Oxford and at the Hebrew University, concentrating on knowledge of Jesus as transmitted in Jewish and Islamic sources. He maintained personal scholarly contact with several of the men whose thought has profoundly influenced the direction of modern life dealt with so intimately in these pages: men such as Chardin, Piaget, and others. Now an American citizen and a New Yorker, Dr. Martin is the author of *Three Popes and the Cardinal*, *The Encounter*, *The Scribal Character of the Dead Sea Scrolls* and *The Pilgrim*, and numerous articles for magazines and journals.

Preface

The men and women of America in the 1970's are no longer human in the way people were fifty years ago. Among them there is a new condition. They have no way of thinking about it; and they cannot put it into words. But they are increasingly aware that this new condition is rapidly making the past and all in it newly alien and unaccountably distant. We of the present generation will be the last ones capable of perceiving the difference between the old and the new. Shortly, there will be millions of Americans who will never have known the difference. As yet, even we notice and comment only on one of its side-effects: the constantly recurring dislocation of order, our malaise at surprise events. It is in the nature of America, due to its importance, to draw the rest of the Western world in its wake. Already the change has gone beyond American shores.

There is at work in the world of men and women a will of irresistible power creating a new circumstance in our society. It is the fulfillment of many men's dreams, but by unheard-of processes. Many, despairingly, read what is happening today as the action of some doomsday machine bringing beauty, happiness, culture, and all humanness to an end. Many more, unbelievably, read it as an iron-clad natural process none of us can resist. Some,

fear-filled, even see it as the plot of a summarily evil intelligence. But, in fact, it is the victory of gentle and transforming love which is being prepared, not the working out of some ungovernable whimsy of nature or, worse, the victory of some irreversible mechanism or diabolical hate that wishes most men and women to misery and chaos in this life and to the cold of eternal death once life ebbs from their bodies.

Love it certainly is, at work within the processes of the spirit; but love neither as a vaguely nice feeling nor as an abstract principle expressed in dreamy inaction, mental ooze, or steamy words. Nor is it a summons to febrile activism in search of relevance and identity. It is love as subsisting in the intelligence and the will of Jesus, while he works within the sequence of human events.

For this prime reason, at first sight most unreasonable, there is no longer any place in our society for the worship of any "figure" of Jesus as a source of unique salvation for all men and women nor for churches and groups that proclaim such a worship. Ever since Jesus was born and died over nineteen hundred years ago, there has been a long series of such figures, from Jesus Messiah in the 1st and 2nd centuries, Jesus Caesar in the 4th and 5th centuries, down to Jesuschristsuperstar in 1970. Romans, Greeks, Russians, Celts, Latins, Nordics, all imaged Jesus to their like. Jews formed their figure of Jesus; so did Muslims. Every new Protestant sect and church from the 16th century onward created its own Jesus figure. So did the professional atheists and convinced agnostics of the 19th and 20th centuries, as did the Jesus People and the ecumenicists of the 1960's and 1970's.

Today the most striking aspect in the matter of Jesus is that all these figures are being fragmented and, one by one, dissipated into nothingness. Every familiar landmark in the personal lives, and in the society around men and women is going up in smoke, disappearing from one year to the next, leaving no grace but intense longing.

This decline in the commanding power of the figures of Jesus is all the more arresting since, once upon a time, many men were convinced not only that they knew him, that through the prisms of these figures they could glimpse the radiant light, Jesus himself, but that he loved them and they him; and that he was an ever-living savior. In his name, millions regulated their daily lives

as well as their private thoughts and their personal actions. And, hoping in him, they died. Millions more were put to violent death, either because they believed in him, or because they refused to believe in him, or because they attacked those who believed in him. Cities were built. Oceans were crossed. Empires were founded. Great art was born. Immemorial sculptures were fashioned. Imperishable literature was produced. All in his name. And, today, all that is seemingly ended. At first, not abruptly. Nor, as it were, by a sudden, crashing, vertical collapse into an unexpected abyss. But, imperceptibly, in a slow decline, a gradual decay.

Doubtless, for some diminishing millions of men, women, and children, a figure of Jesus is still granted a vaguely honorific position in their memories, and it enters automatically into their periodic praying. A Jesus figure is present sometimes in certain men's hopes, but not effectively in their ideals, rarely if ever in their lives as citizens, and still less often in the assertion and vindication of their dignity as individuals. At the crux of very big decisions and at the very important moments of death, life, and love, a Jesus figure is involved only sporadically, usually ritualistically, and quite often merely provisionally. "Dear Jesus, I am writing this to you just in case . . ." were Lucille's words in Frederick Buechner's recent novel *Open Heart*.

Jesus of Nazareth as he was and is is not given any practical importance or prime symbolism for human beings. In the Bernstein "Mass," the Chalice and the Cross—the prime symbols of Jesus—are smashed: nobody has really objected. And some time ago, Jesus not only ceased to be publicly acknowledged as important for the individual self each of us claims to be; rather, he now provides some extra food for our masochism. "This is my body. Take it. Eat it . . ." has been used at least three times in recent theater. Each time it referred to fellatio.

For the first time in many centuries, the death and not the life of Jesus is the salient factor about Jesus. And this death is not sudden or recent. Jesus of Nazareth, we know, died. His death was and still is an accomplished fact. The marked change in the attitude to Jesus today is the accepted note of human finality abroad, like an audience reluctantly acknowledging that dead silence has just swallowed the last haunting echoes of a beloved symphony, and that there is nothing more now than the cold and

the immobility of a corpse. As with all dead and honored corpses, an ever-growing silence and the soft mercy of human forgetfulness envelops his image, his principles, his actions, and his memory.

In the hands of historians, the only stature conceded to Jesus—rather grudgingly—is meager and mind-shriveling. A man who lived at one time in one place. About whom we know a few sparse, insignificant facts. Of whom we have no flesh-and-blood picture appreciable to us moderns, as we conceive reality, beyond his name—and even that can sometimes now be given a mere orgasmic touch: “How come they called you Jesus?” wrote Lucille. “Jeezzus sounds like it had vaseline on it to make it slip in easy.” As a person of “unusual human significance,” there are still some facts to discover and tabulate about Jesus, some more to sift and test, much more to puzzle us indefinitely, and still much more to discard daily and yearly. There thus seems to be a common conclusion at which large numbers of men and women have arrived surreptitiously. And the situation is precisely as if they had trekked to his tomb in the Garden and found that he was, indeed, dead; that, after all, his death had persisted; and that all their image-making of him as alive and triumphant had been empty figure-making. In earlier times, however distorted the Jesus figures were or became, through them men perceived a reality. But by now, the figures have become opaque; only the distortions look upon men who still seek reality and truth. Small wonder that there is little concern as the figures fragment.

But the fragmentation is of Jesus figures and is directly the action of Jesus. For he intends that his love and his creation of happiness be accessible to all men without distinction of color, of region, of culture, of economic status, or of the moment in time when a man or woman is born and lives. The figures are useless for this purpose. Most of them were chosen in view of a Second Coming of Jesus: Jesus had “gone away” and was going to “come back” on some final day. This was and still is plain myth; and the Jesus figures—refined violations of the First Commandment forbidding false gods—turned out to be the idols of that myth. Jesus is not going to return, because he never went away. Besides, all the figures, however fine some were in their beginnings, have ended up as mere distortions of Jesus’ salvation which should

have nothing elitist about it but which has been elitist from the start of Jesus-figuring.

As a multipurpose figure, Jesus became all things to all men: for white Western believers, a symbol of their superiority and a justification of their excesses; for Jews, a repellent figure replete with Christian hate; for Muslims, a supreme prophet, born of a virgin, second only to Mohammed; for Africans and Asians, a symbol of Western colonialism and power. What Jesus achieved and achieves became visibly identified with "Christianity." And this "Christianity" became synonymous and practically coterminous with white culture and Western civilization. All that had to end.

Like broken instruments, the various Jesus figures are now tossed aside as more than useless. And this has profoundly affected the mentalities that spawned them, the structures that would still fatten on them, and the men who are still mesmerized by them: all of the nostalgic ones with memories redolent of the incense, the Latin, and the triumphalism of past days; all those bent on making Jesus relevant by means of febrile engagement in social issues and political questions; the charismatics who would make the spirit of Jesus come in their day and in their way; those who seek a "democratic" solution to Church problems, as well as the Jesus revolutionaries who take it that—in the Maoist phrase—the spirit comes out of the muzzle of a gun; those who insist that Jesus is definitively dead and gone, as well as those who live in the shadow of his imminent "return." All are faced with the inevitable uselessness of any mere figure of Jesus they have chosen.

The process of fragmentation has gone quite far. Indeed, if in our human universe there were only the irreversible flow of time, then both those who mourned it and those who hoped for it would surely see the day when the figures of Jesus jostled with those of Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, and Aurobindo for notice and place in the Hall of Great Men.

The most poignant and puzzling casualty in this situation is the individual, the human self, each one of us claims to be. The human self was always seen as a burning consciousness moving along an ever-hurrying and one-way line of time in space. It had a beginning in time and space: birth. And at death, the burning light of consciousness flickered and went out; the line went

dead for ever. While living, the self was in bondage to its fractional line of existence together with the pains it involved, the failures it brought, the impotence it imposed, and the final negation it assured each man was his inescapable lot. And this is human bondage.

Along its line of existence, the self sought two kinds of knowledge: factual information and meaning. While facts were useful and necessary for living, meaning meant more than merely living. It was a signification, not only in facts themselves, but in the whole ongoing process of the self from the beginning of the line to its end and beyond that end. By means of that sought-after signification, the self hoped to obtain deliverance from the human bondage. And this is human salvation.

In this search for signification, there was born the moral basis for human actions: the human self would, should, act in this way and not in that way, if deliverance and salvation were to be attained. There were many models and archetypes for the moral basis: the Buddha Self, the Jewish Self, the Roman Self, the Muslim Self, to mention a few. For white Western civilization, it was the Christian Self. Over a long period that Self was figured in multiple ways, and always as an imaged archetype embodying the moral basis for all human actions and all human hopes. In that proliferation of Jesus figures, there were three principal Jesus Partners: churches and sects, who claim Jesus; the white nations of the West, whose civilization and way of life were originally based in a belief about Jesus; and the Jewish people, whose conditions of existence were, for a very long time, defined and worked out in terms of opposition to any and all figures of Jesus.

In the present terminal stage of the Jesus figures, we are witnessing a situation among men and women within countries and among individual countries and races, in which power of all kinds—corporate, economic, military, monetary, political, educational—is increasing gargantuanly, but without any moral basis either operative or even acknowledged. Any moral basis for human living and human action in the West was formerly gridded on the archetypal figures of Jesus. These figures are now proven inept; and the moral basis of power and of living they facilitated is eroded. Men cannot any longer agree even as to what the word "moral" means. In the practical politics of living today, the ques-

tion is never: "Is this good or bad?" It is: "Does this increase or decrease my power, your power, our power, their power?" The figures of Jesus, the worship they inspired, and the moral basis they authorized have lost applicability in ordinary human lives.

At the same time, that individual self we each are seems to be more and more panic-stricken about one frightening possibility: that this self is nothing, has no destiny, is a mere process; that its only motto may truly be: "I function; therefore, I am"; and that corrosive forces are tinkering even with this process, forcing it inexorably to a repulsive extinction we know not how or where or when. Our ego panic drives us to look at everything, politics, sexuality, painting, sculpture, music, literature, clothes, food, outer space, as in a mirror. We become actors in a theater of longing, as we seek a reassurance that we are, we really are. Each one seeks for some suggestion or sign that he is himself and that he can be sure of his destiny tomorrow. At the maniac tip of this panic, we can even identify ourselves with some Jesus figure of our desperate fantasies: "I am Jesus Christ," sobbed Lazlo Toth, as he shattered the nose of Michelangelo's *Pietà*. "If you kill me, I will only go to Heaven."

In this morality vacuum, the most facile illusion becomes the most widespread and, in the United States, the most tempting for the individual. If that illusion had a voice, it would state: The very structure of your society and life in that society is baleful; all your science, every new technological advance, all your modernization hastens your end; corporate power, governmental control, urban living, and the homogenization of education, of goods and services, in the hands of an unseen, powerful, immune, and impersonal bureaucracy—all this is a vast, inescapable quicksand into which you, the individual, are sinking daily and irretrievably. Ah! to be in Nepal, Kabul, or Connemara, in Mallorca, Scotland, or the Samoa Islands, where an individual can still be an individual, where windows give on to man's true heaven, the skies smile down on real life, and magic casements still yawn invitingly on to wide plans and untrafficked seas! Each time your "progress" and your technology invade a still virgin human situation, each time merely marks another step in your corruption.

That is the illusion; but the truth is other. Nowhere is the individual more free than in the United States. And nowhere can

he find the same opportunities for human living. Everywhere, not merely in the West, the human configurations of morality are fading, not because of science and technology, but because that which guided the use of science and technology, making them and everything else human, seems to be disappearing with the rest of our landmarks.

The source of this illusion is unmistakable. With the fragmentation and disappearance of the Jesus figures, the Jesus Self has no longer any convenient vehicles for our minds. Words, therefore, fail us. Faith is papered over with shibboleths. There are no referent images or figures valid for us, by which our ideal could be known mentally and verbally as living. Images have become things; figures are objects; they are no longer transparencies through which we see deep within us the truth that is imaged for our minds. Something substantive, it seems to us, has been withdrawn, some common persuasion that love stands behind all human things, that man is somehow in God's image. Without a living ideal, the human self feels lost.

Yet, within the optic of the Jesus Self, nothing more merciful could have happened to that former individual self and its self-made, brittle ideal. For that provided men with many reasons for wanting to die but no major and universally felt reason for living. The old ideal itself is skeletal, desiccated, fading, as impressive as bare bones clanking in the passing winds of time. And desperate minds in revolt have already picked away at any substance clinging to it.

The Jesus Self, however, is spirit, the height, the depth, the breadth of love itself, adhering to man and to his human universe. A strange, unusual concept for our modern minds, which often confuse love with benevolence and spirit with what is called the a-rational. Here is love, not merely a loving person; spirit, not simply a spirit. And the Jesus Self is not a straw thrown to a drowning man, not something tacked on to a miserable fate in order to make it bearable. It is personal and constitutional to each one of us. It infuses the history and the society of humans. It tells us that we never really wished to die, to be nothing. Maybe to be at rest. But not to die. And, after that, to know how all our going and coming could take place in spirit and in love. Not in

view merely of our past, and burdened with the totality simply of our human experience.

This book is a journey through the quagmire of distortions, deformations, and illusions piled around our view of Jesus. It is a journey that continues through a society drawn in painful and constricted lines; where in reaction to the sham and the grossness accumulated in Jesus' name, men and women attempt a vision of themselves and their society that excludes Jesus of Nazareth and so excludes the Jesus Self each of us inexorably is. If that were the end of our journey, we would merely have arrived at the Land of Nowhere, a Planet of Banality. But the end is to arrive at the Word. The Jesus Self. Jesus. He who did not come in order to depart, and need not come again because he never went away. Jesus past. Jesus future. Jesus now.