Christ Actually: Reimagining Faith in the Modern Age

By James Carroll

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An exploration of transcendent faith in modern times—from the author of the *New York Times*–bestselling *Constantine's Sword*

What can we believe about—and how can we believe in—Jesus Christ in light of the Holocaust and other atrocities of the twentieth century and the drift from religion that followed? In this urgent and provocative work, award-winning author James Carroll traces centuries of religious history and theology to face this core challenge to modern faith and to rescue it for the secular age.

Far from another book about the "historical Jesus," *Christ Actually* takes the challenges of science and contemporary philosophy, of secularism, seriously. Carroll retrieves the power of Jesus both as an answer to humanity's perennial longing for transcendence and as a figure of profound ordinariness—his simple life, and his call to imitate him, all suggest an answer to the question "What is the future of Jesus Christ?" This book points the way.

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for *Christ Actually: The Son of God for the Secular Age*

“With well-researched clarity, Carroll explores the question posed by anti-Nazi Lutheran pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer: who actually is Christ for us today?... Because Christ actually is meaningful in some way to a billion Christians around the globe, this heartfelt investigation is of interest to many.”
—*Publishers Weekly*

“Carroll…strives to reconceive Christ for a secular, post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima era….readers seeking a faith responsive to the zeitgeist will find it here.”
—*Booklist*

“An in-depth, thought-provoking challenge to two millennia of Christian interpretation.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Written in the brisk, argumentative style that has won James Carroll a broad popular readership, *Christ Actually* avoids the interminable maundering of academic prose, even as its extensive footnotes indicate attention to advanced, if radical, scholarship. Conservative Christians may well be shocked and annoyed at Carroll’s configuration of Jesus. Nevertheless, for its pushback against the boundaries of conventional interpretations and, above all, for its passionate presentation of the sinfulness of Christian anti-Semitism, his book deserves serious attention.”
—*Commonweal* magazine

Praise for *Constantine’s Sword*

“Monumental…An eye-opening journey through twenty centuries of history..This is a book for everyone.”—Christian Science Monitor

“A triumph.”—The Atlantic Monthly

“A deeply felt work, a book that measures the sweep of history against [his] experience as a man of the church.”—Floyd Skloot, San Franciso Chronicle

“Remarkable . . . A book of a deeper sort.”
—Andrew Sullivan, *The New York Times Book Review*

“A masterly history . . . fascinating, brave.”
—*Time*

About the Author
James Carroll is a Distinguished Scholar in Residence at Suffolk University and a columnist for The Boston Globe. He is the author of ten novels and seven works of fiction. He lives in Boston.

INTRODUCTION

Christ Actually

Against wild reasons of the state

His words are quiet but not too quiet.

We hear too late or not too late.

—Geoffrey Hill1

Operation Spark

In Germany, early in 1943, things got serious with "Operation Spark," the anti-Nazi conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler. In March, two bomb attempts were made on Hitler's life. They failed, but in early April a number of the conspirators were arrested by the Gestapo. One of these was a young Lutheran theologian named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. For two years, he was imprisoned—first at Tegel military prison, in Berlin, and ultimately at Buchenwald and Flossenbürg concentration camps. A committed pacifist entangled in a plot to kill a tyrant, he wrote, "The ultimate question for a responsible man to ask is not how he is to extricate himself heroically from the affair, but how the coming generation shall continue to live."2

Bonhoeffer was executed three weeks before the war ended, before the horrors of 1945 were fully laid bare. Yet there is a hint in his statement that, in the thick of the evil, he had grasped what was now at stake: nothing less than the moral self-destruction, and perhaps the physical self-extinction, of the human species; its "continuing to live." He did not survive to articulate the meaning of what he'd come to, but in subsequent years the fragments of thought he left flashed through Christian theology like crystal shards through a darkened conscience. That was especially so once Auschwitz was paired with Hiroshima—absolute evil absolutely armed: the death camp and the genocidal weapon all at once bracketing the human future. The mad nuclear competition that followed then made the problem of human survival literal.

Initiating a project for belief that has yet to be accomplished, Bonhoeffer declared himself in a letter to his student and friend Eberhard Bethge: "What keeps gnawing at me is the question, . . . who is Christ actually for us today?" That line, written in a Nazi cell, is a shorthand proclamation of Bonhoeffer's penetration to the deepest question about the human condition, which raised, for a serious Christian, an equally grave question about Jesus Christ and the tradition that takes its name from him.

I, too, have found something "gnawing at me," if in far shallower ways than the martyred German. As it happens, I was born precisely as Operation Spark was launched. The son of committed Irish Catholics, I fully embraced that legacy and came of age with Jesus Christ at the center of my identity. But as I grew older, tectonic shifts in culture, religion, politics, and structures of thought cracked the foundation of Christ's meaning—even for me. Among the many factors that have contributed to that dislocation, none looms larger, I see now, than the still unreckoned-with moral catastrophe faced by Bonhoeffer. He was a first witness to the apocalyptic fervor of the Third Reich, the millennial character of the crisis—and the fact that "Christendom," a culture in place since Charlemagne and nearly the sole context within which Jesus Christ had been understood, was mortally undermined by racist Nazi imperialism. And Bonhoeffer was one of the

first to grasp how the ethical shattering of Christendom extended to the keystone of Christian faith—to Jesus himself.

I begin this grappling with the new actuality of Jesus Christ by recalling Bonhoeffer not just because I associate with his hinted-at intuition that we need a radically reimagined Jesus, but because his undeveloped and rudimentary inquiry was sparked—"Operation Spark" indeed—by that brutal confrontation with what has shown itself to be the double-barreled moral problem of our age. The bottomless pit that opened in southern Poland, and into which Bonhoeffer was already staring, was only one chamber of an abyss into which humanity had been plunged also by the devastation of a city in Japan. It was not the scale of bloodshed in these two manifestations that made Auschwitz and Hiroshima historic—other genocides and mass bombings compare, from Stalin and Pol Pot on one side to Curtis LeMay and Bomber Harris on another. Rather, it was the character of Auschwitz and Hiroshima as related revelations about the past and future: the anti-Jewish heart of Western civilization, and the vulnerability of the human species to suicide.

I grew up during the Cold War on bases of the United States Air Force, where my father, an Air Force general, served as a member of America's nuclear priesthood. My otherwise mundane Oedipal reckoning unfolded in the shadow of nuclear Armageddon.3 It was eventually impossible for me to avoid the harsh reality that, taken together, Auschwitz and Hiroshima had changed everything—except human ways of thinking and believing.4 A transcendent shift in moral meaning had occurred. Christians regard what the tradition calls the Incarnation as an interruption in history. But so was 1945. Looking back across the decades, it has finally become clear to me how the actualities of that year forced the question: Who is Christ actually?

Religionlessness

Here is Bonhoeffer's full statement to Bethge:

What might surprise or perhaps even worry you would be my theological thoughts and where they are leading, and here is where I really miss you very much . . . What keeps gnawing at me is the question, What is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today? The age when we could tell people that with words—whether with theological or pious words—is past, as is the age of inwardness and conscience, and that means the age of religion altogether. We are approaching a completely religionless age; people as they are now simply can't be religious anymore. . . . If eventually we must judge even the Western form of Christianity to be only a preliminary stage of a complete absence of religion, what kind of situation emerges for us, for the Church? How can Christ become the Lord of the religionless as well? . . . The question to be answered would be, What does a Church, a congregation, a liturgy, a sermon, a Christian life mean in a religionless world? How do we talk about God without religion? . . . Christ would then no longer be the object of religion, but something else entirely, truly the Lord of the world. But what does that mean? . . . I hope you understand more or less what I mean, and that it's not boring you. . . . Goodbye for now. Yours, as ever. I think about you very much. Dietrich.5

Existentialist philosophy, psychoanalysis, modernist literature, political engagement for the sake of justice—such movements coming to a head after World War II salted the religious self-understanding of Christians, especially in nations bracketing the North Atlantic. Fully developed theologies flourished with figures like Protestants Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich; Orthodox figures like Alexander Schmemann, dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary, in New York; and Catholics of the Second Vatican Council6 like Karl Rahner, Hans Küng, and John Courtney Murray. Compared with the decades-long contributions of such thinkers, all of whom were implicitly responding to crises engendered by the genocidal violence of the century's wars, Bonhoeffer's sketchy intuitions, offered most significantly in his Letters and Papers from Prison, read like picture captions. But the picture he holds up shows the deep truth of an unprecedented

circumstance. It is clear from the passage cited above that the traumatized German was groping for words to express what remained an unspeakable experience. The groping itself is his legacy and challenge.

Paul Tillich, a German Lutheran twenty years Bonhoeffer's senior, lived to carry on the postwar inquiry—mainly because, unlike Bonhoeffer, Tillich responded to Hitler's coming to power by taking up a life in exile in New York. Tillich had been dismissed from his Frankfurt professorship by the Nazis, and he, too, found the crisis of Nazism at the center of his reflections. Like Bonhoeffer, he saw a consequent religionlessness as somehow necessary—but also as revelatory. Indeed, it formed the basis of his existentialist theology, which came to fruition in his postwar reflections, especially in the books The Courage to Be (1952) and Dynamics of Faith (1957). Here, in slightly more abstract language, is Tillich's echo of what Bonhoeffer wrote in the letter to Bethge:

The relation of man to the ultimate undergoes changes. Contents of ultimate concern vanish or are replaced by others . . . Symbols which for a certain period, or in a certain place, expressed the truth of faith for a certain group now only remind of the faith of the past. They have lost their truth, and it is an open question whether dead symbols can be revived. Probably not for those to whom they have died.7

The most important symbol that had lost its truth for Tillich was the symbol of God Himself, which, after Hitler, had been irrevocably undermined. In The Courage to Be, he wrote,

God appears as the invincible tyrant, the being in contrast with whom all other beings are without freedom and subjectivity. He is equated with the recent tyrants who with the help of terror try to transform everything into a mere object, a thing among things, a cog in a machine they control. He becomes the model of everything against which Existentialism revolted. This is the God Nietzsche said had to be killed because nobody can tolerate being made into a mere object of absolute knowledge and absolute control. This is the deepest root of atheism. It is an atheism which is justified as the reaction against theological theism and its disturbing implications.8

In the 1960s, Bonhoeffer was posthumously conscripted into the briefly voguish Death of God movement in Britain and America, which made watchwords of his nascent notions of "religionless Christianity" and "man come fully of age."9 Whether obsequies for "theological theism" are a function of maturity is debatable, to say the least, yet Bonhoeffer's seemed an uncanny anticipation of Europe's postwar exodus from religion, with the resulting mass redundancy of church buildings and the muting of the voices of clergy. Today, apart from the hollow formalism of royalty-ruled churches in Britain and Scandinavia, institutional religion has entirely vacated the public realm of Europe—and, in some places, the private conscience, too.10 In America, the decline of mainstream religion was slower in coming, but the Death of God presented itself as a theological problem more in the United States than anywhere.

As figures of wide influence, there were no successors on either side of the Atlantic to Tillich, Niebuhr, Schmemann, Küng, or Murray. Eventually, with salvos from pop culture, screen technologies, and hyperlinks of the Internet, with "all talk, all the time" draining words of weight and impact—universally at the expense of contemplative reading—the devastation of inwardness itself could also seem a fulfillment of Bonhoeffer's prophecy. "The history of faith," as Tillich put it, "is a permanent fight with the corruption of faith." The fight, all at once, seemed lost. The claim of faith was "exposed to the continuous test of history."11 And for many, it seemed to fail. The late-twentieth-century arrival of a broadly unchurched culture in the North Atlantic nations, with an apparent legion readily dispensing with theism, especially among educated elites and younger people, seemed to suggest that the Death of God theologians had been grappling with something real. "God has hidden his face from the world," as one Jewish Holocaust writer put it, "and delivered mankind over to his own savage urges and instincts."12

Bonhoeffer's focus was on the delivering humans had done, not God, but the "absence of religion" he predicted turned out not to be "complete."13 The "Secular Age" might have dawned in most of Europe and parts of North America—regions of the Enlightenment legacy—but even there, assumptions of an earlier age held fast among many. The twenty-first century's so-called new atheism had its answer in a new fundamentalism, whose leaders, notably in the United States, enlisted on the reactionary side of the culture war being fought over flash points like abortion and gay rights.14 On questions ranging from "family values" to the "war on terror" to the corporate ethos of retail giants, overt appeals to religion, in fact, defined large segments of American society more than ever.15 "Today, one of the most glaring refutations of the case that religion has vanished from public life," as the critic Terry Eagleton puts it, "is known as the United States."16 And not just the U.S. Across the globe, religious true belief has solidified identity in a sea of uncertainty.

Negatively, religion spawned world-historic acts of violence—from the 1995 murder in Israel of Yitzhak Rabin by a Jewish zealot to the perversion of Allahu Akbar over Manhattan, the Pennsylvania countryside, and the Pentagon in September of 2001 to the God-ordained orgy of killing in Norway in 2011 by a Christian supremacist. One wants to separate such killer-nihilism from "true religion," yet jihadist and crusader impulses do have underpinnings in authentic faith. We will investigate that connection in this book.

But the power of contemporary religion has been showing itself positively, too. Essential to the civil rights, human rights, and peace movements in the West, faith was also key to the nonviolent grass-roots revolution that brought down the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Religion was a pillar of the inchoate Muslim awakening to democracy, so hopefully begun in the Arab Spring of 2011.17 Indeed, independent of politics, religion remains a source of consolation and strength—of inwardness and conscience—for global multitudes, decisively including impoverished masses to whom material structures of meaning are simply unavailable.

So was Bonhoeffer wrong? Did religion in fact survive intact, if altered? Did he misconstrue the nature of religionlessness? For that matter, what is religionlessness? I locate this question, first, not in poll numbers or philosophical debates but in a deeply personal problem: having myself absorbed—and learned to take for granted—basic assumptions of the so-called Secular Age, what of my own religious inheritance can I believe without being dishonest? I am no fundamentalist, and the limits of religion, even its perversity, are fully apparent to me. If the faith continues to impose itself as a primal option, it does so in my case despite—or is it because of?—the crises of 1945. What happens when traditional belief slams into the wall of the Holocaust? When it plunges into the abyss of Hiroshima? Those questions are what draw me to Bonhoeffer and his crucial intuition that religion and Jesus Christ are not identical. Because Hiroshima had not happened when he was writing, the potential suicide of the human species was not an actual prospect for Bonhoeffer. Yet the "continuation" of human life had surfaced as an overriding moral problem, and I, a nuclear warrior's son, live to be haunted by it to this day. In Buchenwald, Bonhoeffer may well have had a foretaste of the full horror of Auschwitz, but that particular death camp's meaning as an epiphany of radical evil remained implicit. For me, though, its meaning as an obliteration of inherited religious absolutes could not be more explicit. The point is that Bonhoeffer, in all of this, sensed that some pin had been removed from the ordered mechanism of civilization, and I know with personal certainty that he was not wrong. How had the jailed German pastor come to such knowledge? Decisively, the answer involved what he saw befalling the Jews.

In April 1933, a newly empowered Hitler tipped his hand when he ordered the Nazi boycott of Jewish businesses, prompting a Germany-wide display of anti-Semitism. For several days, Jewish businesses, synagogues, institutions, and individuals were subject to insult and even attack—a dress rehearsal for the violent assaults against Jews that would escalate across the decade. Right at the outset of the Nazi campaign, raising a rare voice of protest in that first year, Bonhoeffer published the essay "The Church and the Jewish Question." He called on his fellow Christians to stand with Jews against their persecution by the Third Reich. The Church should be prepared, he wrote, "not only to help the victims who have fallen under the wheel,

but," if necessary to stop the murderous careening, the Church should be prepared "to fall into the spokes of the wheel itself."18

Bonhoeffer might not have been aware of it, but such a grasp of an absolute moral mandate to oppose assaults on innocent Jews had to undermine, however gradually, the sanctified religious anti-Judaism on which such an anti-Semitic campaign depended—a religious anti-Judaism to which Bonhoeffer himself still subscribed. In 1933, Bonhoeffer opposed Hitler-friendly Church leaders who, in line with Nazi racism, wanted to bar all non-Aryans from ordination in the ministry, but, at least in that early period, he still saw conversion to Christ as the Jewish destiny. Jewish religion had no reason to continue. That Bonhoeffer was a Christian supersessionist is probably what accounts for the fact that he has never been named a "Righteous Gentile" by Yad Vashem, the Jerusalem Holocaust museum.

The main point, though, is that an authentic rejection of racial anti-Semitism had to lead, however indirectly, to a rejection of religious anti-Judaism. Here Bonhoeffer was putting his ethical insight ahead of his theological conviction. This elevation of ethics over theology is what made him a religious revolutionary. Few Christians saw it yet, but wicked hatred of Jewish persons and doctrinal denigration of Jewish religion were joined as a grenade is to its pin. Bonhoeffer, simply by taking in what was in fact happening all around him, even as most Germans averted their eyes, found himself set on a course of personal and religious change.19

By 1938, when the Nazi onslaught climaxed in the blatant violence ofassaults on Jews everywhere in Germany and Austria, Bonhoeffer's understanding of the relationship between Church and Synagogue had evolved—an at least implicit abandonment of supersessionism—to the point that he saw them as equal "children of the covenant." In the margin of his Bible, next to Psalm 74, Bonhoeffer wrote, "November 10, 1938"—the date of what came to be known as Kristallnacht.20The adjacent verses read, "They set thy sanctuary on fire, to the ground they desecrated the dwelling place of thy name . . . How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? . . . Why dost thou hold back thy hand?" The attacks on Jews had become a matter of religious revelation. "Crystal Night" took its name from glass being shattered all over Germany—Jewish businesses, homes, and places of worship being ransacked and torched. All at once, the Lutheran pastor's own Martin Luther had to look different: "To save our souls from the Jews, that is, from the devil and from eternal death," Luther had written long before, "my advice is, first, that their synagogues be burned down, and that all who are able toss sulphur and pitch; it would be good if someone could also throw in some hellfire. Second, that all their books—their prayer books, their talmudic writings, also the entire Bible—be taken from them, not leaving them one leaf."21 This was a Luther with whom Bonhoeffer could have nothing further to do.

By the time of his Ethics, written in Berlin between 1940 and 1943, Bonhoeffer began to see the theological meaning of the political horror unfolding in Germany, and his simple insight amounted by then to a personal revolution: "An expulsion of the Jews from the West," he wrote, "must necessarily bring with it the expulsion of Christ. For Jesus Christ was a Jew."22 We will see how this assertion is not as obvious as it seems in the twenty-first century; in the first half of the twentieth century in Europe, home of the Aryan Christ, it was revolutionary.23 The expulsion of Jews meant the expulsion of Jesus—full stop. Only a realization of such magnitude could have then prompted the pacifist pastor's enlistment in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler: "For Jesus Christ was a Jew."

Note that Bonhoeffer does not say, as Martin Luther did in the title of the first of his two tracts about Jews, "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew." Luther's emphasis belongs on "was born," since the whole point of the Gospel narrative, once "the Jews" rejected Christ's teaching and sponsored his crucifixion, is that Jesus became something else—"the firstborn of the new Creation," the first Christian.24Bonhoeffer's life-changing insight, in envisioning Jesus as one of those expelled—"Juden raus!"—is surely what gave rise to

the great question he then asked from prison: Who actually is Christ for us today? He had already provided the beginning of the answer. Jesus Christ was a Jew.

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Bonhoeffer's personal reckoning sparks mine. I have outgrown a childish faith in Jesus, but he remains the one to whom my heart first opened when I became aware. What I grasped of him on my small knees before the crucifix in St. Mary's Church, stripped by now of the dross of dogmatism, remains the pulse of my faith. This book is my attempt to say why Jesus has this hold on me, but the attempt requires a certain historical sweep, a theological scope. I will return to the New Testament, but, fully attuned to our contemporary struggles, I will read those texts through the lens of centuries of total war and corrupted power, trying to see how violence, contempt for women, and, above all, hatred of Jews distorted the faith of the Church I still love.

Yet Jesus is elusive. If he were not, he would be useless to us. An ultimate paradox lies at the heart of Christian belief: Jesus is fully human; Jesus is fully divine. Best to say frankly right here at the outset: Jesus as God and Jesus as man are the brackets within which this inquiry will unfold. It will look at Jesus, the Scriptures, and tradition in the contexts of both history and theology. It will ask how the texts about Jesus were written at the start, how they were interpreted early on, and how they can be understood today. That means keeping in mind at least three distinct time frames—the lifetime of Jesus, the era some decades later in which the Gospels were composed, and the present Secular Age, when faith in Jesus and in the Gospels has become a problem unto itself.

Jesus is fully divine? What can that mean now? Before dismissing such a claim, or diluting it with literary-critical revision to the point of meaninglessness, I post a kind of cautionary declaration against which every assertion in this book must be measured: if Jesus were not regarded as God almost from the start of his movement, he would be of no interest to us. We would never have heard of him. Nothing but his divinity accounts for his place in Western culture—or in my heart: not his ethic, which was admirable but hardly uncommon; not his preaching, which was firmly in line with Jewish proclamation; not his heroic suffering, which was typical of many anti-Roman Jewish resisters; not his wonder working, which was attributed to all kinds of charismatic figures in the ancient world. Nothing but a two-thousand-year-old divinity claim puts Jesus before us today.

And more: if a faith in Jesus as Son of God—a present self-disclosure of God's fatherly and forgiving disposition, an "incarnation"—does not survive the critically minded, scientifically responsible, properly "secular" inquiry of the kind I aim to undertake, however imperfectly, then Jesus will surely drop back into the crowd of history's heroes, ultimately to be forgotten.

The God/man affirmation, in other words, need not condemn this pursuit to irrationality or absurdity—or to a separate "non-overlapping magisterium" where normal rules of logic do not apply.25 It can, instead, sponsor a retrieval of the light, depth, and beauty of Christian tradition at its best, even while offering a new way—appropriate to a less credulous time—to say that Jesus is Christ; that Jesus Christ is God. Speaking quite personally, nothing matters more to me than that. For no other reason would I take up this work.

But the words "Jesus" and "Christ" bring us back to Bonhoeffer, for whom, under the pressure of history, the key was Jewishness. For while "Jesus" can be routinely understood as a Jew, "Christ" is taken to be the claim that cuts him off from Jewishness. In fact, on the hinge of this contradiction, as Bonhoeffer saw, turns every question—both those that close off inquiry and those that open into new understanding.

Jesus a Jew26

That “Jesus” was Jewish can seem an obvious statement today, but in fact, the idea has barely penetrated the shallow surface of Christian theology.27 And we are not just talking here about grossly anachronistic distortions of Jesus into something alien—like the blue-eyed, flowing-haired Northern European who appeared in the picture Bibles, holy cards, and altar murals of modernity.28 No, the anti-Jewish distorting goes deeper than race, ethnicity, or cultural milieu. Lessons of the Holocaust notwithstanding, it perverts the religious imagination of the West to this day.

Christian anti-Judaism springs from the Gospel construct, dating to the late first century, that pits Jesus against “the Jews” during his Passion and death, which occurred early in that century. That construct led to the “Christ killer” slander, which many Christians have declined to repeat since World War II.29 A transformation of mainstream Christian theology, centered in the Roman Catholic reforms of the Second Vatican Council, has mostly transformed the age-old “teaching of contempt” for Jews into a “teaching of respect.” Most Christians routinely, and authentically, renounce anti-Semitism. Christian scholars and religious leaders find in Jews creative and open-minded partners in the momentous project of interfaith dialogue; Jewish scholars and leaders reciprocate.30 Nevertheless, a chasm separates Jewish and Christian perspectives, and the slow plumbing of this chasm will be a main project of this book. The separating gulf begins not at the beginning, but not long after the beginning, with the portrait first drawn of Jesus and then, across time, reified by the Church.

Among Christians, and therefore among everyone else, thinking about Jesus has not really changed much, because, even beyond the most troubling verses (“His blood be on us and on our children,” for example31), the entire structure of the Gospel imagination assumes a cosmic conflict between Jesus and his own people such that, despite the narrative’s taking pains to place Jesus in the line of David, he was hardly portrayed as authentically Jewish at all. This is more than, say, Mark’s pitting him against Pharisees in Galilee and against high priests in Jerusalem; more than the libels of the Passion. As the Christian memory overwhelmingly shapes the story, Jesus is opposed not just to particular antagonists but to the whole culture into which he was born.

In the Prologue to John’s Gospel, we find the theme struck with power: “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not.”32 It’s a basic rule of narrative, older than Aristotle: every story needs a conflict. In history—in about the year 30, the first of our three time frames—the mortal conflict faced by Jesus, like every Jew in occupied Palestine, was with Rome. But the Gospels—dating to that second time frame, between 70 and 100—do not tell it that way. As various historians and theologians point out today,33the virtues of Jesus (openness, compassion, egalitarianism) are constantly displayed in the Gospels precisely by contrast with his corrupt Jewish milieu, which is rendered as exclusivist, unloving, legalistic, and mercilessly hierarchical. “Jesus” is the name of the manual laborer from Nazareth. Once he began to see himself, or be seen by others, as the exalted “Christ” (from the Greek for “anointed” and meaning “Messiah”), Jesus began to be understood as other than Jewish, even if his declared identity was as a fulfillment of Jewishmessianic expectation. His being “Christ,” that is, worked against his being “Jesus,” because his elevation up the pyramid of what scholars call “high Christology”—from peasant Galilean to anointed Christ; then to apocalyptic Son of Man; then to favored Son of God; then to preexisting Logos, or “Word”; ultimately to second person of the Trinity, and “True God of True God”—had the practical effect of obliterating the single most cogent note of his identity as a man.

Judaism, after all, is a religion—a form of mediation between humans and God. Such mediation is necessary because, by definition, humans cannot have direct access to God. If it were otherwise, there would be no need of religion. But because Jesus as the Word of God(“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”34) was understood as fully participating in the Godhead, in immediate mystical union (“I and the Father are one”35), the Gospel writer makes it clear that Jesus had no real need of the mediation of religion. He had no real need, that is, of

the Jewish rituals of sacrifice, Temple observance, salvation history, metaphors, memory, Book, Law, peoplehood. Jesus underwent the paradigmatically Jewish initiation of circumcision, yes, but early Christians obsessively invented non-Jewish reasons for him to have done so.36 Christian theology, since at least the Council of Chalcedon, in 451, has insisted on the true humanity of Jesus, but by deleting the religious significance of this main fact of his particular human condition, theology has simultaneously undercut his humanity. Belief in the divinity of Jesus as usually propounded, that is, makes his authentic Jewishness not just unnecessary but impossible.

Since well before Bonhoeffer, Christian scholars have known there is a problem here. But ever since Bonhoeffer—and the crisis of the war—theologically minded historians, together with historically attuned theologians, have been driven to do heroic work in addressing that problem. We will see that. But scholarship aside, a complete transformation of popular consciousness and faith has yet to occur. If our reach is toward such a transformation here, still our reckoning with the full Jewishness of Jesus Christ will mark only the start of the story, not its end point. Taking my own case as typical, I thought years ago that I understood the meaning of the Jewishness of Jesus, having been ambushed one afternoon in the Art Institute of Chicago, for example, by the sight of the French-Jewish artist Marc Chagall's White Crucifixion, a large painting of the crucified one draped not with the familiar loincloth but with a Jewish prayer shawl. The cross rises up from a lit menorah, and the figure is surrounded by fugitives dressed in recognizably Jewish garb, terrorized by raging fires. I read, presumably on the artwork's posted identity card, that Chagall had painted the work in 1938, in response to Kristallnacht. Jesus was a Jewish victim! But that recognition came to me in the tumultuous 1960s, when it seemed the most natural thing in the world to see Jesus, even more dramatically, as a kind of Che Guevara Jew, in rebellion against the corruptions of most fellow Jews and a Jewish establishment that saw to his killing. That perception was a block to what Chagall revealed. Who the victim?The line from Sophocles came to me, first, in this connection: "Who is the slayer, who the victim? Speak!"

The so-called Dead Sea Scrolls marked the start of a scholarly transformation and ultimately, in my case, a personal one—a decisive illumination of the context within which Jesus lived. Having been discovered beginning not long after the end of World War II,37 the ancient texts produced whole libraries of studies demonstrating that in the time of Jesus, there was not one "Judaism," but a multiplicity of Judaisms. Various Jewish groups of that ancient era vied with one another, sometimes violently, over such questions as: Who is the "true Israel"? What is the Temple's place? How is the Law to be kept? Given such a context, it can now be seen that Jesus in conflict with fellow Jews over just such questions was not anomalous, but typical. If he was a rebel, it was for the cause of his people. His participation in intra-Jewish disputation—arguing with Pharisees, for example, over what was permitted on the Sabbath—underscored his integrity as a defender of Israel, not its opponent. The Christian mistake—mine—has been to miss that context of intra-Jewish tension. Even today, what is more Jewish than the argument over what it is to be a faithful Jew?

In other words, the post-Holocaust task, deriving from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's rudimentary insight, is to make the Jewishness of Jesus the first lens through which to view him. This means, perhaps, putting aside for a time—and this is rarely done—the viewfinders of the four Gospels, all of which are usually read to locate the heart of his conflict with "the Jews" in his rejection of Jewish cult and Law. Our view of Jesus must come into focus around a new organizing principle: nothing we say or believe about "Christ actually" can be allowed to exclude the authenticity of his profound and permanent participation in the life of Israel.

Twice a day, Jesus pronounced the Shema.38Every Sabbath, he read the Torah—or, if he was illiterate,39 was present for its reading. He believed that God's Torahwas given to God's people, Am, to be brought to life in God's land, aretz.40As regularly as he breathed in oxygen, he took in God's saving history. At least once a year, at Passover, his attention turned to the Temple in Jerusalem, for the burnt offerings of animals while Psalms were sung. He observed purity and revered the Temple. And if, as most Jesus historians still

assume, he enacted a “cleansing” demonstration of some kind there, it was less likely an attack on the purity system of the Temple, as the story is usually read, than a defense of it. We will see more of that.

Jesus must not be imagined, in sum, as a pretend Jew, any more than he can be regarded as having been a pretend human being. If he preached the good news of love; of the trustworthiness of God, who is like a father; of the Kingdom of God41 present here and now, he did so from within Judaism, not against it. He preached not a New Testament God (of love) in opposition to an Old Testament God (of judgment),42 but one God: the God of Israel, pure and simple.

But for Christians to actually accommodate such an adjustment in their view of Jesus, they would first have to confront the indictment of their own most sacred tradition that is made explicit in the catastrophe of Christian anti-Semitism. Here is why the extensive postwar revisions by scholars—historians and theologians both—have had so little impact on the minds of ordinary Christians. Here is why, in the Catholic context, the theological transformation conceived at Vatican II was all but stillborn.43 This failure to reckon with an essential Christian failure about the Jews, for that matter, is at least part of why the spirit bled from mainstream Protestant denominations in the decades after the failure showed itself. And it is why the only form of Christian belief to actually grow in these years—evangelical fundamentalism—is a faith dedicated to the restoration of the very biblical literalism that put “Christ killer” Jews at risk in the first place. To actually change their understanding of Jesus Christ, that is, Christians would have to far more fully confront the Church’s own ancient and ongoing betrayal of Jesus, the one that makes such change necessary.

It is curious that Christians should find it so difficult to imagine that both ordinary members and consecrated leaders of the Protestant and Catholic churches alike should have grievously let their Lord down in the twentieth century’s Nazi era, since the Gospels emphasize that, in the first century, the entire inner circle of Jesus’ followers abandoned him in his hour of need. Over time, the ubiquity of such failure by “the faithful” was de-emphasized to the point of being forgotten as the Church developed its mechanisms of self-canonization. But, because of sand thrown by history, those mechanisms are stuck.

The history in question, of course, includes not just failures of the followers of Jesus, early and late, but also the counterbalancing glories of sustained intellectual inquiry. That project—faith seeking understanding—steadily promoted new levels of human wisdom, but ultimately, with the coming of rationalism at the time of the Enlightenment, it also undermined traditional notions of nature and the supernatural, a development that had to affect understandings of Jesus. So this book, about belief in the Secular Age—like any work on the topic—has necessarily been provoked by challenges arising from science, but that is not its primary stimulus. Far more gravely, this reflection aims to reckon, for the sake of faith, with the tragic compulsions of human behavior.

There are, to be sure, intellectual obstacles to traditional faith, but many otherwise “modern” believers have accommodated those, if only by leaving critical reflection and historical-mindedness outside when they pass through the door of the church. Yet in the twenty-first century, ethical obstacles to belief have become increasingly difficult to ignore. Moral anarchy has shown itself in sanctuary after sanctuary, whether one considers the descent of strains of Eastern Orthodox religion into Islamophobic brute nationalism (think of the recent Balkans wars, in which genocidal attacks on Bosnian Muslims by Orthodox Serbs were religiously justified); or the ongoing Roman Catholic blasphemy of a power structure protecting priestly child abusers instead of their abused victims; or the evangelical Protestant embrace in America of know-nothing bigotry against immigrants. Whatever Christ is preached by such churches, what Christ can actually be seen through them?

But perhaps the palpable readiness of the faithful to confront this dark character of Christian religion—and abandon it in droves44—does indeed flow, if only unconsciously, from the prior moral trauma that initiated

this period of accountability. Bonhoeffer's death-row recognition was simple, and may yet prove timeless: if Jesus had been remembered across most of two thousand years as the Jew he was, the history of those millennia—and their climax in the crimes of the Thousand-Year Reich—would be very different.

Our search for a believable Jesus necessarily assumes a fresh encounter with the Gospels and the epistles of Paul. Our reading will be informed by a firm grasp of the historical forces to which those writings were responses. Roman violence against Jews overwhelmingly generated those forces, and we will see how. It's enough here to note that all the writers of the New Testament sought to give their readers the message—and the figure—they sorely needed, just at the time of their writing. The Gospel themes of suffering endured, violence rejected, failure forgiven, and discipleship maintained were directly addressed to the conditions that would surely have defined the experience just then of those who clung to the memory of Jesus. Archetypical were Peter, who, by betraying Jesus, became the exemplar of the forgiven one; Paul, who invented a transforming understanding of Jesus; and "Mark," the first and paradigmatic Gospel writer. We will see how all of the first Jesus interpreters, working in the second of our three time frames, presented with remarkable freedom the oral and written material that had come to them across the years since the life and death of Jesus. And we will take special note of how this remembering, interpreting, and, finally, writing were all tied to "the Scriptures," which, of course, meant for those early Jesus people the Hebrew Scriptures.

We will take for granted the largely invented character of the narrative that came of all of this, how it was shaped from various elements, only one of which had a connection to what we might call the historical record. Against the assumption of most Christians today, the Gospel writers aimed less at facticity than meaning. We twenty-first-century readers of sacred texts about Jesus could usefully take this interpretive and presentational freedom as license for our own interpretations, even if by now Paul, "Mark," and the others are to us what they were not to themselves—which is Bible.

Many of the questions asked by modern believers—and many of the notes of faith dismissed by modern skeptics—lose their bite when it is acknowledged that they were neither questions nor notes of faith for Jesus and his first interpreters. For example, our contemporary way of seeing is bifocal, based on the supposition that all reality is oppositional. To see a thing wholly, for us, is to see its foil, too. Existentially, this can be understood as generated by Descartes: isolated self against all else. Socially and politically, the pattern is associated with Hegel: thesis against antithesis. Our minds are constantly slicing perception, and joining its halves, whether explicitly or not, with the hyphen word "versus": religion versus politics; natural versus supernatural; faith versus reason; meaning versus fact; now versus then; ethical present versus apocalyptic future; Gospel versus history; fiction versus truth; metaphorical versus metaphysical.

This divided-mindedness may have come into its own in modernity, but it pervades our story, reaching all the way back nearly to the start. For one factor to rise, another must fall. Such a dynamic, in fact, long ago overwhelmed the Christian imagination, which, as we shall see, took its final form from an extreme conflict—not the contentions of doctrinal dispute, but the savagery of violence—that was inflicted on believers, extreme conflict that ultimately set the Church against the Synagogue: the primordial oppositionalism.

But what happens when a mind openly in the grip of such habitual dichotomizing encounters the experience of long-dead strangers who were at first not given to thinking this way? To acknowledge essential ignorance about how precisely those strangers took in reality, and expressed themselves about it, is the beginning of a new sort of understanding. That returns us to our initial and greatest oppositional set: the paradox of Jesus the human who is Christ the divine.

As war in the twentieth century gives us our starting point, war in the first and second centuries will give this account its largest shape. The Gospel writers had an intuition, and it was shared by their readers, that only

within the context of meaning provided by Jesus Christ could the extreme disruptive experiences they were undergoing make sense, or be survived. Jesus—as first made available in the drama of his usurping a rival, or mentor, named John the Baptist; and then in the other dramas that brought him to Jerusalem and the "place of the skull," Golgotha—was the key to the meaning of God's covenant in the new context of violent strife. Jesus, that is, was the figure in whom the in extremis fulfillment of God's promise could be seen. God was faithful to Jesus, up to and through death. The Gospel readers, at the mercy of war, desperately needed to know of that faithfulness, and to find it on offer to them.

But God's "faithfulness," as the essence of good news, was later replaced in the heart of belief by the "faith" of the Church, as defined by the loyalty oath of creeds. Modern readers of the sacred texts have attempted to enter that distant world of implication with the "doctrinal" Christ at the threshold, but twentieth-century incredulity about doctrine itself slammed that door for many. At another, once promising threshold stood a figure deemed to be the "historical Jesus," but the impossibility of getting reliably behind the sources kept the academics bickering, and the meaning of Jesus seemed more elusive than ever. And why shouldn't most laypeople remain indifferent to the contentious work of Jesus scholars?

Yet in an inquiry like this, scholarship must be key. Indeed, modern theologians and historians have laid the path for us, and, despite the squabbling, what a golden road that work opens up. The historian Diarmaid MacCulloch calls Jesus scholarship of the past two centuries "perhaps the most thoroughgoing and sophisticated analysis of any set of texts in the history of human thought."45 Informed by such scholarship, I am attempting an instance of faith submitted to reason, which, in this era, means doctrine rescued from all that is doctrinaire. Therefore, the beloved Creed must be criticized. Its every word, the theologian Hans Küng writes, "must be translated into the post-Copernican, post-Kantian, indeed post-Darwinian and post-Einsteinian world, just as former generations, too, had to understand the same Creed anew at decisive shifts of historical epoch."46 History shapes faith, which might seem the most banal of observations, yet in a tradition that long ago set itself against history, it is revolutionary. But the current epoch—shaped not only by Copernicus and company but by the moral challenge of which Bonhoeffer is an avatar—has forced the question anew. Critical belief is the only humane belief, a simple fact that follows from the endowments of mind with which our Creator showers us.

So theologians and historians do indeed center this work, but the interpretation offered here draws on witnesses, too—mostly, in my case, the silent witness of the fellow believers with whom I rub elbows in the Communion line on Sundays. With them, I routinely submit reason to faith, knowing that the endowments of mind are insufficient to account for themselves. At Mass, fortunately, there is a place for mental vacancy, too—the quiet contemplation that is not the enemy of critical thought, but its trustworthy companion. My fellows in the pew sustain my faith. With them, I stand to hear the Gospel read, and they help me to pay attention.

The Gospel writers had what we might call a theological concern, but they were not doing theology. They had reference to received data from the past, but they were not doing history. The closest we can come to what those ancient authors were up to is simply to say that they were telling a story. Against all that is doctrinaire and historicist, the intuition that drives the present work is that the simple story of Jesus—whatever the history behind the story—offers a necessary structure of meaning, and perhaps even a mode of survival. Stories exist to be taken, first, at face value, even if, second, they demand to be read in light of theological reflection and historical criticism. Stories deserve to be thought about, yes—but mostly to be taken in.

So creeds, doctrines, and the scientific method of textual analysis all give expression to the meaning of the Gospel—but they are not the Gospel. The Gospel is the story. What this work is doing, between the brackets of theology and history, is returning to the story. We are doing so if only because, as story, the Gospel of

Jesus Christ has braced the human imagination in a way far surpassing any other artistic or intellectual creation. Its meaning for culture, its primacy in Western civilization, would be enough. Yet more than culture is at stake here.

Culture, of course, shapes this inquiry—shapes me. I am a Catholic, informed by the Catholic tradition, but the enforcers of Catholic orthodoxy are not sitting on my shoulder. The only authority I assert is the authority of what I think. I make no claim to objectivity. Indeed, my entire point is subjective, however much the writing aims to be critically informed. The wonder of the way God works in history lies in the fact that the core proclamation of what's called good news powerfully arises out of what is time-bound, as well as out of the thicket of failure so vividly on display in what precedes and follows. Human fallibility marks the story at hand as much in its first century as in its twenty-first.

But unlike the work of theologians and historians, this work also asks whether the story of Jesus should be the starting point at all. "Jesus is the answer" is scrawled on the walls of tenements and prison cells, but sometimes, just below it, one also reads the addendum "What is the question?" After Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the true gateposts of the Secular Age, the question is not the survival of belief as much as the survival of the human species itself. As this reflection begins in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's cell, and in my own youthful faith, it will move through the harshest of challenges, including the unrelenting darkness of war and its resulting ideology of oppositionalism, to find a pragmatic way forward in the world as it is. The faith we seek, the Jesus Christ we aim to retrieve, is the key to a new meaning of redemption, which is, for the first time in history, nothing less than the literal possibility of a human future. We look again for Jesus Christ because we need a reason now for hope. The end of this book is not threat, but promise.

CHAPTER ONE

Personal Jesus

Jesus Christ, with His divine understanding of every cranny of our human nature, understood that not all men were called to the religious life, that by far the vast majority were forced to live in the world, and, to a certain extent, for the world.

—James Joyce1

Where Is God?

The word "genocide" and I are exactly the same age. It is, perhaps, outrageously narcissistic of me to strike an autobiographical note in relation to the historic crime that, until then, had no name, yet the coincidence of timing somehow explains the obsessiveness of my Catholic preoccupation with the fate of Jews. So yes, "genocide" was coined the year I was born.2 It was the year that Los Alamos opened and the year Auschwitz became a true killing factory.3 The arc of the years since then defines the curve of the recognitions that shape this book. Awareness of the moral legacy of the Shoah and a felt sense of the radical contingency of life under the threat of the genocidal weapon have largely altered understandings of the human condition itself. The premise of this book is that those recognitions should therefore by now have equally changed the way Jesus Christ is thought of, by believers and nonbelievers alike. No such transformation has taken place. Yet Jesus has become a problem across the boundaries of faith and skepticism, the problem with which this book wrestles.

In my case, the change began with the paired witnesses Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel, whose testimonies overlapped. In 1960, I saw the filmed version of The Diary of a Young Girl as a high school senior at the U.S. Air Force base theater in Wiesbaden, Germany. Holocaust denial was a broad cultural motif

everywhere, but in Germany proper, the murdered ones remained—as ghosts. While unacknowledged, the disappeared were nevertheless a felt presence. Our American enclave, for example, was a river town, an easy boat ride up the Rhine from Koblenz, which, we'd heard, was near Hinzert, one of the notorious "night and fog" concentration camps, part of the death network administered from Buchenwald. We sons and daughters of the American occupiers had whispered of such places, wondering what the Germans we encountered knew of them. Yet we were unable to actually imagine the horrors.

Suddenly, with the on-screen dramatization of the Frank family's plight, the death camps were less unreal. The movie (like the play) ends with Anne's sweet voice declaring, "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart." But I wondered. I left the movie theater feeling more shaken than I'd ever been by a film. I immediately read Anne Frank's book, and felt implicated by it. Yes, she wrote those affirming words—but that was before she was taken off to Auschwitz. If she could have spoken from the grave—or the pit—what would she have said, actually? That question was the beginning of my inquiry.4

Anne's was a real face for the horror, a girl with whom to identify. Many stateside Americans had this reaction to her, I knew, yet on Wiesbaden's Biebricher Allee, where my Air Force family lived, I was all at once aware of Jews—former neighbors who were simply no longer there. Ghosts indeed. The film and book turned the abstraction of the "displaced persons," as Jewish victims were still referred to, into a deeply felt anguish. On my street, Jews had been rounded up. Yet what I felt was less empathy than perplexity. I knew better than to assume that, had I been in Amsterdam, I myself would have been at risk in an annex room, like the Franks. No, I would not have been a victim. Then what? Sophocles again.

Elie Wiesel, whose Night I read only a year or two later, just as I was embarking on the religious life as a young seminarian, was another sufferer whose fate troubled me. The book describes the cramped dormitory where young Eliezer slept on the narrow upper berth of a bunk bed, a detail with which I unexpectedly identified, since my own childhood bed had been a shelflike upper bunk above the bed below. It seems wrong now to have made any comparison, yet I did. Under my bunk had been my brother Joe's bed. Two years my senior, he had been stricken with childhood polio, and the disease, after numerous surgeries, left his legs twisted and shorn of muscle. Sometimes in the night, across the years that took me into adolescence, I would crane over the edge of my bunk to look down at my sleeping brother, expecting that he had kicked his blankets off. I would stare at his skeletal thighs and shinbones, bruised and gnarly with scar tissue. Under Eliezer, in that rancid death-camp dormitory, was not a disease-tortured brother, but his dying father. Eliezer, too, was powerless to help.

A shallow sort of empathy for Wiesel—even if my brother's suffering went deep—yet I felt it. But that was as far as this recognition could take me. As a young seminarian anxious to prove my faith, I was troubled by the outrageous challenge to God around whichNight organizes its narrative. Whatever my sympathy for Wiesel, it could not outweigh the scandal I took from his book's climactic blasphemy—that, after such death as Auschwitz inflicted on the chosen people, God himself was dead.

In response to a fellow inmate's called-out prayer at Auschwitz, Wiesel replied, "Blessed be God's name? Why, but why would I bless Him? Every fiber in me rebelled. Because He caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves? Because He kept six crematoria working day and night . . . ? How could I say to Him: Blessed be Thou, Almighty Master of the Universe, who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as our fathers, our mothers, our brothers end up in the furnaces?" Then Wiesel reports that a man asked, "Where is God? Where is He?"

In a well-known passage, Wiesel recounts an incident that occurred at Auschwitz. Prisoners were forced by the Nazi guards to stand before the gallows and watch as a child hung from a noose,

struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. . . .

Behind me, I heard the same man asking:

“Where is God now?”

And I heard a voice within me answer him:

“Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows.”5

For Wiesel, this moment epitomizes the death of God, an end of faith that equates, as negating revelation, with the theophany on Mount Sinai. Indeed, Auschwitz was the opposite of theophany—the manifestation of nothingness. Yet it transformed the imagination of many Jews, with history trumping religion as a defining note of identity—history perceived from the point of view of its climax in the Shoah.6

But I did not read the gallows passage as divine abandonment. For me, the vision evoked by Elie Wiesel at Auschwitz was a manifestation—and I would not see for years what a perversion this was—of the depth of God’s longing for human beings, God’s readiness to take their suffering as His own. Quite simply, to me, the young man whom Wiesel saw on the gallows was Jesus on the cross. His death was a replay of the great redeeming sacrifice. Jesus was the answer to suffering—to my brother’s, surely, but also to Anne’s and to Elie’s.

Like Christians of old, I was struck that the Jewish vision—Wiesel’s vision—entirely missed the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross. In my own version of an ancient Christian surprise, I thought it obtuse of Wiesel—though I’d never have uttered such an insult—not to have recognized in his lynched campmate the agonized Christ, who alone redeems the evil of every abyss.

Enchantment

What one makes of Jesus depends, first, on how one sees the world. Though born near the middle of the twentieth century, I was initiated, like so many of my kind, into a way of thinking and believing that owed more to the Middle Ages than to modernity. I use myself as an example not because my case is special, but because it is not.My faith was grounded in a common teaching that shaped the views of most Catholics and many Christians. Fewer and fewer people in the contemporary age have experience of such a worldview, yet it was the decisive milieu in which every experience of Jesus could be had.

Religion, as I first embraced it, was less a realm apart than all of life, taken together from a certain perspective—a naive perspective, since it was not understood as such; not understood to be merely one of numerous possible vantage points. In my youth, all but unknown to me, premises of belief had supposedly been refuted decades or centuries before. Descartes, Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Sartre: hadn’t they all done their worst—or best—already?7 But the intact cogency of immigrant Catholicism in postwar America—and the same was true in other denominational settings—felt perennial, immune from any possible assault, including those said to have already occurred, whether from a profoundly threatening “science,” depth psychology, or from the erosions of “materialism.” In piety, liturgy, theology, and even metaphysics, midcentury Christian institutions were advancing conceptions of reality that had been untouched by the Enlightenment.

Intellectually, the parish in which our values and understandings were rooted was, well, parochial. But then, in our view, so was the much larger cosmos, consisting of a three-tiered geography, with Earth firmly bracketed by the up and down of heaven and hell, which were actual places to us. If space was constricted, so

was time, with the now of this life set off from the then of afterlife. The realm of nature was set off from grace, the immanent from the transcendent. Yet all of these borders were porous. The natural world was under the influence of supernatural forces, which could interrupt history and alter the course of normal lives. Spiritual beings populated not just the cosmos but the air around us—saints, angels, archangels, spirits, and the devil, whose name was Lucifer. In grade school, I was instructed by the nuns to leave room in my chair for my guardian angel, ever beside me. For Catholics, the Blessed Virgin Mary was a vivid presence. Not so long before—in my mother's lifetime—Mary had appeared to children like me, albeit Portuguese shepherds in the town of Fátima.8 Our Lady was capable of showing up anytime. Sun rays penetrating clouds to form a golden fan in the sky could itself seem an apparition. Was that her?

A Christian could participate in the economy of miracles by way of an earnest recitation of prayers. Specially blessed rosary beads were a feature of the Catholic parish. At Mass, the women absently carried them, wrapped around fists or dangling from fingers, the way office workers now display credentials on clips or chains. Sometimes, watching television from the living room floor, I would glance back at my mother and see her lips moving, only to glimpse the beads in her lap. I recall thinking that they slipped through her thumb and forefinger the way cartridges moved into the machine guns of war movies. A woman who stifled expressions of distress, Mom showed it mainly in her compulsions of devotion. Quiet supplication was her constant mode, and a wealth of aids was available in the form of relics, which she handled like pieces on a game board—the little gold pendants and boxes that enshrined bits of bone or cloth, tokens of the saints who had already overcome all woes and worries. A game board, but more than a game was in play. Relics had one function in our house, as I understood whenever I saw her touch them to my brother's withered legs. The prize of her collection was a crystal vial of holy water said to have been collected from the stream at Lourdes.9 At night, she sprinkled Joe's bed before kissing his forehead. I was entranced by, and wholly convinced of, the efficacy of such rituals. It did not occur to me to wonder why my brother's ordeal was never lessened, or why his legs were never made whole.

All of this defines an enchanted world that was not recognized as such, perhaps, until it was declared "disenchanted" by social scientists.10 As I came of age, eventually learning in school to name and date Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, and Darwin (although not Marx, Freud, or Sartre), Benedictine monks and Jesuits instructed me and my mates on the compatibility of science and faith (Copernicus was a priest!), helping us to avoid the common notion that descent from monkeys, say, undercuts the creed. My teachers, that is, protected the fragile middle ground between atheism and fundamentalism, the middle ground where most American Christians lived at the time, although fewer do so now. But the clerics taught these lessons with an imperative vehemence that showed that religion had things to fear in the secular progression, as Charles Taylor defines it, from living in a "cosmos" that crackles with intimations of the transcendent to being included in a "universe," which understands itself wholly in its own terms. Reformation, Renaissance, Enlightenment, science, deism, skepticism, and "a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane"11 left traditional religion on the defensive. And instead of inviting questions, a gingerly Christian education in modern ideas discouraged them. Evolution was real, but so were Adam and Eve. Earth revolved around the sun, but it remained, nevertheless, the center of God's creation. Man was its pinnacle. Natural law reflected the Creator's absolute presence in creation, but the laws of nature could be violated by the miracle-working Creator at will. The moral order was arranged in a "hierarchy of being" that was presided over by God, yet leveling principles of democracy were, at least in our America, to be revered. There were as many contradictions in this new cosmology as there were stars in the night sky—and they were taken in stride by chalking them up to "mystery." The night sky's galaxies seemed infinite, but—a priori—could not be. Only God was infinite.

And because of the sin of Adam, God was at infinite remove. Our human forebears had abused their gift of free will, and that was what accounted for the suffering that was part of every life. I saw this early. If I could not actually put myself in the place of the first two biblical ancestors who'd started the unbroken chain of

human sorrow, I readily attached their bequeathed misery to my Irish grandparents. I sensed the weighted legacy I had from them—the measure of what I knew to call original sin, which might have been the first large idea I made my own. My mother's mother carried the wound of the Irish famine in her sad eyes, and my father's father displayed it in his taste for alcohol, which, early on, I recognized in the sour odor of his breath. The "ould sod" was the Eden from which my family had been sent into exile. When, at the end of every rosary recitation, we prayed as "poor banished children of Eve,"12 I thought of green Ireland.

Punishment was a feature of the world first presented to me. As my sense of time began not with the first day of creation, but with the eaten apple, my religion began in the idea of hell. I often lay awake at night, in that narrow bunk above my scar-ridden brother, parsing definitions of the Baltimore Catechism, which made clear that "the damned will suffer in both mind and body, because both mind and body had a share in their sins." The body's suffering would consist in being "tortured in all its members and senses." Fire was the given image. Nausea choked me during those dark-night bouts of anguish, as I struggled to get my brain around "infinite pain, infinitely felt—forever." Plunging into that idea—down, down, down—was the nightmare that, when I woke just before hitting bottom, made me know why they called the sin of Adam the "Fall." My first luminous sensation of transcendence, that is, was the horror of eternal damnation. Obsessed with hellfire, I once held my hand over a candle to test the pain. I managed not to cry out, but the blister became infected.

In fact, I was a good boy, rarely punished by my parents. But I dreaded punishment all the more for that—which, no doubt, helped me to be good. The most dramatically locating experience of my childhood was initiation into the Sacrament of Penance: Confession. At age seven or so, I grasped that the confessional booth was the judgment seat of God, which was why the priest, God's representative, was seated, while we the penitents would kneel. First Confession was prerequisite to First Communion, scheduled for the next day. Ahead of the momentous rite of passage, I was instructed in the rubrics of self-scrutiny, which presented me with what I understand now as my first conscious moral dilemma. I was assured by the nuns that I was guilty of sins and that, in the darkened booth of the confessional, I was to explicitly admit them—not so much to the priest but to God, who was in there, listening. Of course, God already knew what my sins were.

My dilemma was immediate, and simple. I could not think of any "sins" I had committed. The examples offered in the preparation sessions—anger, lying, stealing, taking God's name in vain, failing to say prayers—defined actions and attitudes to which I had no known connection. Not that I assumed innocence. I was convinced that I had committed sins, but without knowing what my sins were, which was surely another lapse. So, on my knees in the darkened booth, staring at the profile of the priest, whose aroma reminded me of my grandfather, I confessed to neglecting my prayers, although, to my knowledge, I had not. I said I had disobeyed my parents, which I would never have done. I admitted having had bad thoughts, with no clue as to what such thoughts could be. In the recitation of my scrupulously memorized Act of Contrition, I solemnly declared to God that I was sorry for my sins less because I "dreaded the fires of hell" than because they offended Him, who "art" all good—and that was not true, either.13 Avoiding the fires of hell was absolutely the point of what I was doing. No sooner, having carefully made the sign of the cross in sync with the priest's words of absolution, did I push out through the velvet curtain into the shadowy church than it hit me that, in my first Confession itself, I had lied. Now I had a sin—a mortal one. And God knew it! More than that, it was God to whom I had been untruthful! As I knelt at the Communion rail to say my Hail Mary, I stifled sobs, which the nuns took as a signal of my piety—a further deception. My emotion was moral panic, pure and simple, a draft of the poison of scrupulous self-loathing that can ambush me to this day.

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