CHAPTER ONE

CURIOSITY AND THE GHOSTS OF THE PAST

On Mission Street, near where I live, are many shops scattered with images of the one called Jesus. Images of Jesus appear on heavily lacquered wall plaques, candles, velvet wall hangings, plaster bobble-head toys, and even liquor flasks—not to mention the many jewelry shops filled with cross pendants, cross necklaces, and cross earrings. When I walk by the store windows I am particularly intrigued by the men's silk shirts, decorated with scenes of the suffering Jesus wearing a crown of thorns. These shirts, available in red and blue, are worn by Latin gang members as they roll toward retaliation drive-bys. Around the subway stations, particularly on weekends, dueling Evangelistas scream the name ''Jesus'' at pedestrians through portable microphones. The streets are littered with pamphlets full of words about a savior and more pictures of the crucifixion. Even in one of the most post-Christian cities in America you cannot escape the ghost of Christ-consciousness.

On Monday afternoon a shirtless man holding a tall can of malt liquor sits down next to me on the park bench to ask a favor. He pulls out a Gideon New Testament and opens it to find

the number of a woman he wants to call on my mobile phone. Sandwiched between Gospel books is a rear-view picture of a naked woman with a phone number scrawled underneath.

''Now that's a piece of ass I'd like to have,'' he says as he hands me the picture. Slurping his beer, he begins to lecture me on the apocalyptic prophecies of the Bible. ''You had better believe me when I say, that the end is near and Jesus is coming back real soon.''

Whether Jesus is coming back soon or not, it is clear that in Western societies Jesus is overexposed—like an ''it'' girl in Hollywood who takes every role she's offered without discretion—only Jesus plays these parts involuntarily. It is often said that when you become a public figure you are no longer in charge of your image; you become a cultural commodity. And so the carpenter from Nazareth has been fashioned into a brand name—his likeness now employed to fuel and justify varied and competing agendas. Governments and gangs invoke his name as they go to war, even while concerned protesters march the streets with painted signs, countering their prayers, quoting his words: ''Love your enemies and do good to them.''

TOXIC CHRISTIANITY

Waiting to board a plane to Montreal, I listened to the frustrated Francophone voices in front of me grumbling, ''Tabernac!'' as I tried to decipher their conversation using my rusty college French. Later I discovered that in Quebec the most offensive words are not familiar four-letter profanities, but religious words with specific references to the Catholic Church. When someone is truly angry, you are likely to hear the French word for tabernacle, communion chalice, or the wafer host of the Eucharist. This inventive use of language relates to deep resentment toward the church because of its past dominance and the monolithic role it once played in the public life of Quebec. At one time all the land in Quebec was owned and managed by the church. New immigrants were required to attend Mass, observe the sacraments, and follow the dictates of local priests under the duress that their land grants might be revoked. During ''The Quiet Revolution'' of the 1960s cathedrals were torn down as an act of liberation.

It is difficult for someone raised under the shadow of these ghosts to find good news in anything associated with the Jesus of Christianity.

For many people in the global West, Jesus of Nazareth is too familiar to be captivating in any sense other than the amusement of taboo humor or in the mockery of ''provincial'' religious affections. Our familiarity with the one called Jesus has bred both cynicism and sentimentality. My sense, however, is that what most of us know about Jesus we know somewhat vicariously through the later development of the religion that we now call Christianity. Many of us, understandably, are suspicious of organized, institutional religion. Calling to mind the inquisitions, religious wars, and slavery justified by scriptures, we may often feel that religion is the problem—not the solution to our deepest longings as people. And we are invited to wonder whether it was ever Jesus' intention to found a religion at all.

A subterranean narrative stands in contrast to the dominant histories of Christianity, a quieter story of people who did not hold on to power, but attempted to surrender themselves to the energy and teachings of the master in the way of love. In each generation people continue to explore the meaning of Jesus' message and work for their time.

I have become increasingly hesitant to identify myself as ''Christian,'' because when I say the word I notice people clicking over to their default images and stereotypes and responding to me out of those negative constructs. They make assumptions about how I think and feel about various political and social issues. It is as if I had inherited someone else's bad reputation.

In San Francisco I often see a bumper sticker that reads, ''Jesus, please save me... from your followers.'' For many, the disparity between Jesus and those who claim to follow him creates cognitive dissonance, ambivalence, and hostility. At my children's soccer practice a Jewish friend asked me, ''Did Jesus hate the Jews?'' She went on to explain that her parents, who are holocaust survivors, grew up in Eastern Europe, where ''Christian'' families

often told their children that the Jews chop up little Christian kids and put them in their matzo ball soup at Passover. The generational distance, antagonism, and pain ran so deep in her family that my friend was never told that Jesus was actually Jewish.

Fragile creatures we are, and not always good or reliable containers for divine wisdom and goodness. Leslie, a woman I once worked with, was devastated by her ''Christian'' sister's response to her coming out lesbian. After listening to the details of the story, I suggested to Leslie that her sister's history of mental instability may have influenced her reaction more than the fact that she was a Christian. The loudest voices among us are not always the most reliable nor credible. Crazy people have always been drawn to religious figures and communities, with predictable results. Conversion experiences, though emotionally powerful, often parallel childlike awkwardness or the extreme behaviors of adolescents. This speaks more to human sociology and psychology than to the relative validity of a given spiritual path. The irony here is that many spiritual communities unintentionally mar their reputations by graciously including unstable and marginalized people who are scorned by the general society. It is often the poor and broken among us who are most willing to become students of the master.

We often spend so much time reacting to religious traditions or a religious culture that we have little energy left to cultivate a proactive spiritual path. Even among ''believing'' people, there is often more critique and conversation about ''the church'' or parochial issues than honest engagement with the ways of the master—how Jesus lived and what he taught. Perhaps we have been too easily pleased by our overeducated ability to analyze and deconstruct. Rather than being skeptical, why couldn't our collective sense of unrest about religion and spiritual community motivate us to be more curious and engaged?

PERPLEXED BY CHURCH

In the story of my own spiritual path, I'm told that I was no ordinary child. I don't mean to imply that I was exceptional, only peculiar. I was not a ''gold star'' student in the Sunday School program I attended, nor was I a particularly noble or sensitive child. But when I was twelve I had a powerful spiritual renaissance—which

also happened to coincide with my sexual awakening. I became increasingly aware of the force of my will and was searching for wisdom about how to live. In a rare moment of silence, I contemplated that, if there was a God, and if Jesus had come to show us the way to God, then it made sense for me to surrender myself to whatever God's wishes might be. I recognized my life as a gift and sacred trust and whispered a prayer in which I promised that I would obey whatever I discovered by reading the scriptures.

From a copy of the New Testament, in plain language, decorated throughout with simple line drawings, I read the four Gospels like a magazine, reading the stories that interested me and skipping the parts I found boring. I was drawn to the teachings of Jesus and the accounts of his life. Soon I felt that I wanted to be one of his disciples and imagined myself becoming part of his revolution.

My primitive fidelity to Jesus gave me no love for attending church services or Sunday School. Early on Sunday mornings my family frantically rushed to get ready for church. I pulled on ill-fitting polyester pants, a button-up shirt, and uncomfortable dress shoes in dreaded anticipation of a morning spent sitting in a formal building singing hymns and listening to sermons. As I think about it now, there is more than a little irony in the fact that we sat passively in a regal sanctuary listening to messages based on the adventures of a homeless bearded prophet who wandered the cities and countryside caring for the poor and healing the sick and inviting people to follow his example. How exactly were we seeking his kingdom by gathering like this? For me these environments functioned like museums displaying spiritual realities as exotic specimens in a cabinet of curiosities—removed from life in the here and now. The context conveyed more about the dogmas of tradition and region than the revolutionary life of the master.

Walking down the street in my neighborhood one day, I noticed that the ornate building that once housed St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church was now painted red and had been converted into the Hua Zang Si Buddhist temple—a major west coast destination for the practice of traditional Chinese Buddhism. The crosses and pews were replaced with impressively large statues of the Buddha, and the parish residence was now a monastery compound housing two dozen nuns. The smiling nuns, sporting

shaved heads and wearing bright orange robes, eagerly greet visitors at the door. As I toured the new facility I wondered what the working-class German immigrants, who financed and built this edifice in the late nineteenth century, would think if they knew of the building's new use. It reminded me of the many historic stone-block churches I saw along Lake Street in Aberdeen, Scotland—none of which are used anymore for worship. One was converted to a high-end restaurant, another was an art studio, and a third church building housed a darkly gothic dance club.

Some would think that a church building becoming a Buddhist temple or a night club is an ominous ''sign of the times.'' But people move away, kinship bonds loosen, and buildings fall out of use, becoming standing mausoleums of a spiritual community. The fact that property remains while a community dwindles poses some interesting dilemmas—like the church in our neighborhood with fewer than ten members that owns $10 million in real estate.

Recently a friend told our daughter Hailey about a church burning down. Confused, she furrowed her brow and asked, ''If a church is not an event or a building, but a group of people, how can you burn down a church?'' To those prone to religious fetishes and rituals, Paul of Tarsus once announced, ''The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands'' (Acts 17:24). Jesus taught that God lives inside of people and that our bodies are the temple of God.

Perhaps the reality of the good news proclaimed by Jesus only becomes real to us when we see it manifest through the lives of others. If my interest in spiritual matters depended solely on my experience with church meetings, I would have quickly dismissed the message of Jesus, as many of my friends did in early adolescence. Yet throughout my childhood there was energy and goodness at work in my family that attested to spiritual realities. My parents' faith in Jesus was expressed through an intentional way of life. We lived in a diverse urban neighborhood where I watched them offer care and hospitality. A neighbor my father found lying drunk in a ditch one winter day became our ''Uncle Leroy'' and joined us for Sunday dinners and holidays. We knew a man in a wheelchair who wore makeup and dresses. I played with kids in smoke-filled apartments on the Native American reservation

while my mom chatted with their mothers. We visited people in prison and welcomed travelers. My parents became ''Mom'' and ''Dad'' to many of our schoolmates who were neglected or abused. Occasionally my father would say, ''We don't need to go to church today; we are the church.'' Every day my family prayed or read the Bible together, and we sang spiritual songs and discussed our ponderings about what it might mean for us to walk in the ways of Jesus in the times we were living in.

As a teenager my spiritual pursuits became fanatical. I carried a Bible with me, studying and meditating for hours each day. I lived as a self-styled ascetic, without music, movies, or television. Beginning when I was thirteen, I spent the summers traveling and ''preaching the gospel'' in children's clubs and city parks. By age nineteen I was the director of a Christian nonprofit working with children and families in government housing projects and traveling and speaking to churches.

BETWEEN SENTIMENTALITY AND CYNICISM

As a teenager I often felt stretched between two worlds and still, in fact, feel suspended between the sentimentality of folk religion and the cynicism of a secularized culture.

For those who inherit a sentimental view of religion, Jesus often functions as a ghost or lucky charm. In junior high I was known as ''the preacher'' among the working-class Catholic and Lutheran kids in my neighborhood, who came to me with their moral dilemmas, prayer requests, and theological musings about heaven and hell, God and Satan. They didn't question the existence of God, nor did they feel captivated by the opportunity to live in the revolution of the kingdom. They were, it seems, haunted by God and by ''the church'' and wished to do whatever it took to simply be left alone.

In some Christian traditions, children are hurried along to embrace Jesus as a personal savior without space for genuine curiosity: ''You love Jesus, don't you Johnny—oh yes you do. Johnny loves Jesus, yes he does,'' a mother coos in a sing-song voice to her three-year-old. People raised in such practices are often robbed of a genuine inquisitiveness about Jesus—because they know too much too soon. The knowledge that ''Jesus is the

savior of the world and you're going to hell if you don't believe it'' doesn't leave much room for curiosity.

In the accounts of Jesus' life, people had a chance to explore whether or not the message of Jesus was good news for them. Even his closest companions went through cycles of attraction, curiosity, trust, and doubt—and we know that for some of them, this process continued for the rest of their lives.

In other families children learn to despise Jesus as the warmongering Christmas tree icon of America, a fairy-tale god only believed in by the simple, uneducated, or politically conservative.

In high school I was transferred to a magnet school where my spiritual sincerity was met with predictable antagonism by the children of left-leaning upper-class intellectuals. In a snarky voice my friends would ask, ''Does Jesus still love me?'' after telling me about a decadent weekend party at one of their parents' mansions along the river. Among my peers at school we debated the existence of God and discussed metaphysics and epistemology. My explanations of belief were consistently answered with default skepticism. Although they prided themselves on being open minded, my classmates were nevertheless blinded by the intolerance of inbred cynicism. Sometimes my only answer to their jeering was to assert that there must be something unique about the only figure among the world's religions whose name is employed as an expletive.

How did Jesus respond to sentimentalists and skeptics? One day a maudlin old woman shouted from the crowd, ''Blessed is the woman who gave you birth and nursed you.'' Jesus countered her syrupy words with the pronouncement, ''Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it'' (Luke 11:27–28). And to skeptics who questioned his credibility, Jesus replied, ''If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own'' (John 7:17). To both the sentimental and the cynical Jesus had one reply: ''Walk with me.''

After two thousand years, the name of Jesus is still a lightning rod of controversy, bringing out the best and worst of humanity. Haunted by the religious ghosts of our past and the social pressure to accept or reject, we are robbed of the opportunity to be genuinely curious about the one called ''the Nazarene.'' I

believe we are invited to move beyond sentimentality and cynicism toward an engaged curiosity about the real Jesus who plays hide and seek with us behind the icons, bobble-head toys, and kitschy liquor flasks. We may find a figure who is far more compelling and mysterious.

CONVERSATION

Jesus and culture. What cultural associations and images come to mind when you hear the name ''Jesus''? How do you think familiarity affects our ability to hear what Jesus had to say?

Who was Jesus and what was his message? Is this an open or interesting question for you? Why or why not? Jesus confounded even his closest friends, provoking them to ask, ''Who is this man?''

Jesus and the church. Do your experiences with organized religion give you a more or less favorable impression of Jesus and his message? How would you explain the similarities and differences between who Jesus was and how he is culturally appropriated?

EXPERIMENTS

Sentimental or skeptical? In regard to Jesus, we often lean toward either sentimentality or cynicism. Which tendency is more characteristic of your current posture? You might become more curious about Jesus by talking with someone whose view differs from yours. If you consider yourself a ''true believer,'' find someone to talk with who is skeptical. If you are cynical about Jesus or organized religion, ask someone who is Jesus-positive to explain their enthusiasm.

From critique to creativity. Most of us have looked around the religious landscape and wondered, Why can't it be different than it is? On a sheet of paper, brainstorm ten words you would use to describe your dream faith community. If you can imagine it, maybe it can happen. What can you do to take the first step to initiate it?