

# THE FORGOTTEN JESUS

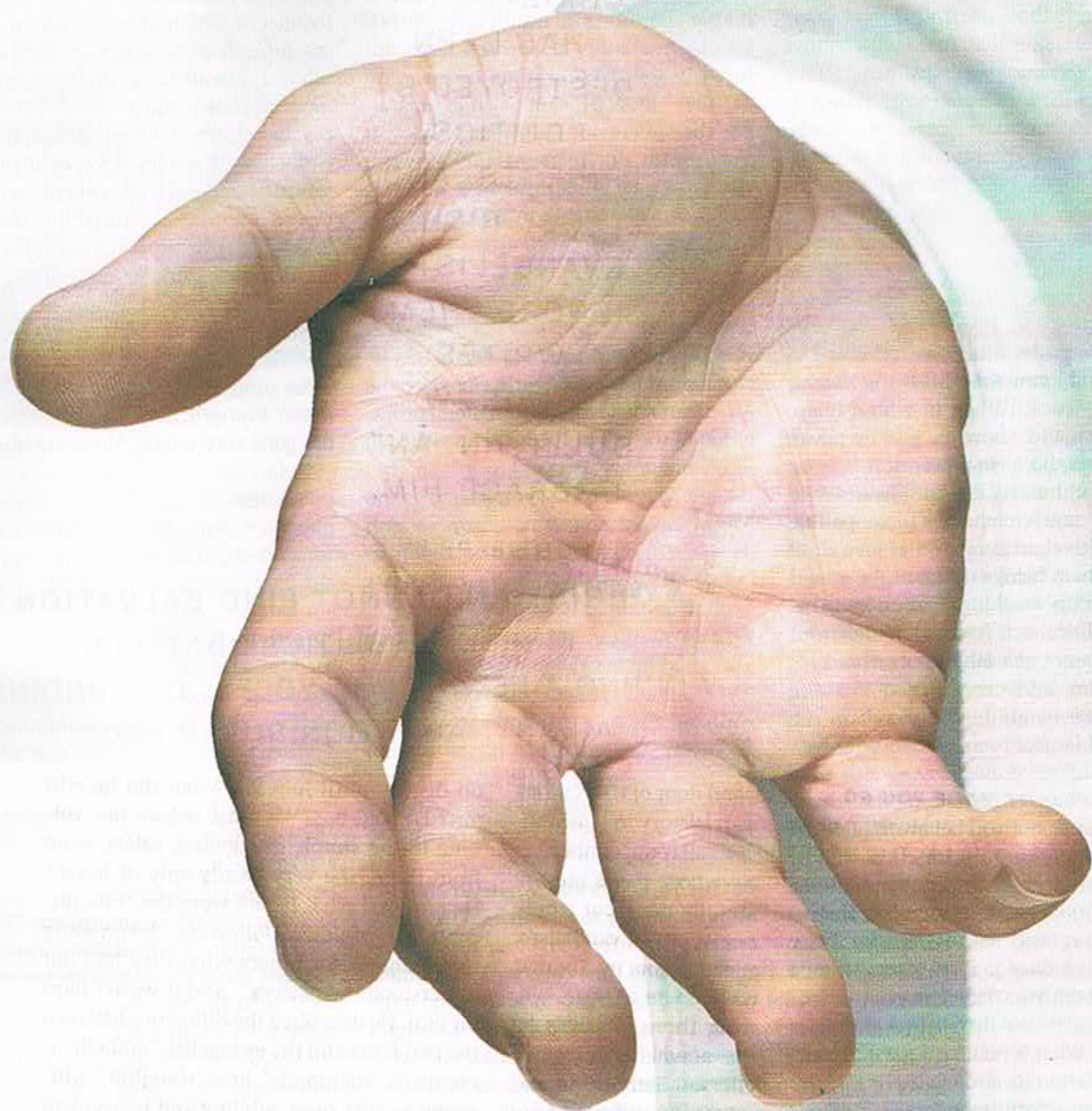
CHRISTIANITY  
HAS BEEN  
DESTROYED BY  
POLITICS,  
PRIESTS, AND  
GET-RICH  
EVANGELISTS.  
IGNORE THEM,  
WRITES  
**ANDREW  
SULLIVAN**, AND  
EMBRACE HIM.

PHOTOGRAPH BY  
BARTHOLOMEW COOKE

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**IF YOU GO** to the second floor of the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., you'll find a small room containing an 18th-century Bible whose pages are full of holes. They are carefully razor-cut empty spaces, so this was not an act of vandalism. It was, rather, a project begun by Thomas Jefferson when he was a mere 27 years old. Painstakingly removing those passages he thought reflected the actual teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, Jefferson literally cut and pasted them into a slimmer, different New Testament, and left behind the remnants (all

on display until July 15). What did he edit out? He told us: "We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, select, even from them, the very words only of Jesus." He removed what he felt were the "misconceptions" of Jesus' followers, "expressing unintelligibly for others what they had not understood themselves." And it wasn't hard for him. He described the difference between the real Jesus and the evangelists' embellishments as "diamonds" in a "dunghill," glittering as "the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered



to man." Yes, he was calling vast parts of the Bible religious manure.

When we think of Jefferson as the great architect of the separation of church and state, this, perhaps, was what he meant by "church": the purest, simplest, apolitical Christianity, purged of the agendas of those who had sought to use Jesus to advance their own power decades and centuries after Jesus' death. If Jefferson's greatest political legacy was the Declaration of Independence, this pure, precious moral teaching was his religious legacy. "I am a real Christian," Jefferson insisted against the fundamentalists and clerics of his time. "That is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus."

What were those doctrines? Not the supernatural claims that, fused with politics and power, gave successive generations wars, inquisitions, pogroms, reformations, and counterreformations. Jesus' doctrines were the practical commandments, the truly radical ideas that immediately leap out in the simple stories he told and which he exemplified in everything he did. Not simply love one another, but love your enemy and forgive those who harm you; give up all material wealth; love the ineffable Being behind all things, and know that this Being is actually your truest Father, in whose image you were made. Above all: give up power over others, because power, if it is to be effective, ultimately requires the threat of violence, and violence is incompatible with the total acceptance and love of all other human beings that is at the sacred heart of Jesus' teaching. That's why, in his final apolitical act, Jesus never defended his innocence at trial, never resisted his crucifixion, and even turned to those nailing his hands to the wood on the cross and forgave them, and loved them.

#### POLITICIZED FAITH

Whether or not you believe, as I do, in Jesus' divinity and resurrection—and in the importance of celebrating both on Easter Sunday—Jefferson's point is crucially important. Because it was Jesus' point. What does it matter how strictly you proclaim your belief in various doctrines if you do not live as these doctrines demand? What is politics if not a dangerous temptation toward controlling others rather than reforming oneself? If we return to what Jesus actually asked us to do and to be—rather than the unknowable

intricacies of what we believe he was—he actually emerges more powerfully and more purely.

And more intensely relevant to our times. Jefferson's vision of a simpler, purer, apolitical Christianity couldn't be further from the 21st-century American reality. We inhabit a polity now saturated with religion. On one side, the Republican base is made up of evangelical Protestants who believe that religion must consume and influence every aspect of public life. On the other side, the last Democratic primary had candidates profess their faith in public forums, and more recently President Obama appeared at the National Prayer Breakfast, invoking Jesus to defend his plan for universal health care. The crisis of Christianity is perhaps best captured in the new meaning of the word "secular." It once meant belief in separating the spheres of faith and politics; it now means, for many, simply atheism. The ability to be faithful in a religious space and reasonable in a political one has atrophied before our eyes.

#### ORGANIZED RELIGION IN DECLINE

Meanwhile, organized religion itself is in trouble. The Catholic Church's hierarchy lost much of its authority over the American flock with the unilateral prohibition of the pill in 1968 by Pope Paul VI.

sex lives, about who is entitled to civil marriage, and about who pays for birth control in health insurance. Inequality, poverty, even the torture institutionalized by the government after 9/11: these issues attract far less of their public attention.

For their part, the mainline Protestant churches, which long promoted religious moderation, have rapidly declined in the past 50 years. Evangelical Protestantism has stepped into the vacuum, but it has serious defects of its own. As *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat explores in his unsparing new book, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, many suburban evangelicals embrace a gospel of prosperity, which teaches that living a Christian life will make you successful and rich. Others defend a rigid biblical literalism, adamantly wishing away a century and a half of scholarship that has clearly shown that the canonized Gospels were written decades after Jesus' ministry, and are copies of copies of stories told by those with fallible memory. Still others insist that the earth is merely 6,000 years old—something we now know by the light of reason and science is simply untrue. And what group of Americans have pollsters found to be most supportive of torturing terror suspects? Evangelical Christians. Something has gone very wrong. These are impulses

## A CHRISTIAN CANNOT FIND SALVATION BY FIGHTING POLITICAL BATTLES, WINNING A FEW NEWS CYCLES, OR FUNDING AN ANTI-ABORTION SUPER PAC.

But in the last decade, whatever shred of moral authority that remained has evaporated. The hierarchy was exposed as enabling, and then covering up, an international conspiracy to abuse and rape countless youths and children. I don't know what greater indictment of a church's authority there can be—except the refusal, even now, of the entire leadership to face their responsibility and resign. Instead, they obsess about others'

born of panic in the face of modernity, and fear before an amorphous "other." This version of Christianity could not contrast more strongly with Jesus' constant refrain: "Be not afraid." It would make Jefferson shudder.

It would also, one imagines, baffle Jesus of Nazareth. The issues that Christianity obsesses over today simply do not appear in either Jefferson's or the original New Testament. Jesus never spoke of homo-



sexuality or abortion, and his only remarks on marriage were a condemnation of divorce (now commonplace among American Christians) and forgiveness for adultery. The family? He disowned his parents in public as a teen, and told his followers to abandon theirs if they wanted to follow him. Sex? He was a celibate who, along with his followers, anticipated an imminent End of the World where reproduction was completely irrelevant.

### THE CRISIS OF OUR TIME

All of which is to say something so obvious it is almost taboo: Christianity itself is in crisis. It seems no accident to me that so many Christians now embrace materialist self-help rather than ascetic self-denial—or that most Catholics, even regular churchgoers, have tuned out the hierarchy in embarrassment or disgust. Given this crisis, it is no surprise that the fastest-growing segment of belief among the young is atheism, which has leapt in popularity in the new millennium. Nor is it a shock that so many have turned away from organized

Christianity and toward "spirituality," co-opting or adapting the practices of meditation or yoga, or wandering as lapsed Catholics in an inquisitive spiritual desert. The thirst for God is still there. How could it not be, when the profoundest human questions—*Why does the universe exist rather than nothing? How did humanity come to be on this remote blue speck of a planet? What happens to us after death?*—remain as pressing and mysterious as they've always been?

That's why polls show a huge majority of Americans still believing in a Higher Power. But the need for new questioning—of Christian institutions as well as ideas and priorities—is as real as the crisis is deep.

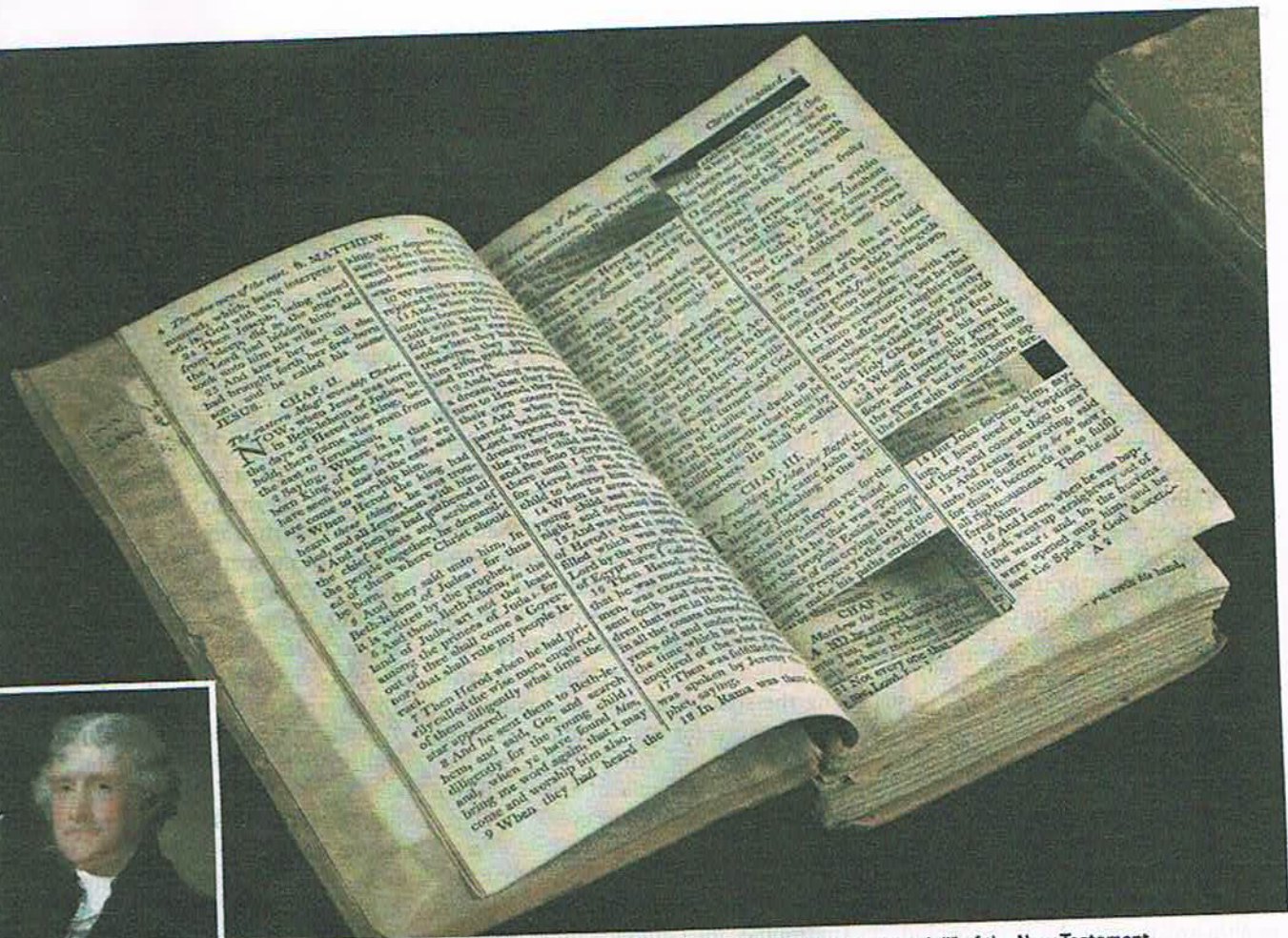
### BACK TO JESUS

Where to start? Jefferson's act of cutting out those parts of the Bible that offended his moral and scientific imagination is one approach. But another can be found in the life of a well-to-do son of a fabric trader in 12th-century Italy who went off

to fight a war with a neighboring city, saw his friends killed in battle in front of him, lived a year as a prisoner of war, and then experienced a clarifying vision that changed the world. In *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography*, Augustine Thompson cuts through the legends and apocryphal prayers to describe Saint Francis as he truly lived. Gone are the fashionable stories of an erstwhile hippie, communing with flowers and animals. Instead we have this typical young secular figure who suddenly found peace in service to those he previously shrank from: lepers, whose sores and lesions he tended to and whose company he sought—as much as for himself as for them.

The religious order that goes by his name began quite simply with a couple of friends who were captured by the sheer spiritual intensity of how Francis lived. His inspiration was even purer than Jefferson's. He did not cut out passages of the Gospels to render them more reasonable than they appear to the modern mind. He simply opened the Gospels at

Jefferson cut the "diamonds" of Christ's teachings out of the "dunghill" of the New Testament.



random—as was often the custom at the time—and found three passages. They told him to “sell what you have and give to the poor,” to “take nothing for your journey,” not even a second tunic, and to “deny himself” and follow the path of Jesus. That was it. So Francis renounced his inheritance, becoming homeless and earning food by manual labor. When that wouldn't feed him, he begged, just for food—with the indignity of begging part of his spiritual humbling.

Francis insisted on living utterly without power over others. As stories of his strangeness and holiness spread, more joined him and he faced a real dilemma: how to lead a group of men, and also some women, in an organization. Suddenly, faith met politics. And it tormented, wracked, and almost killed him. He had to be last, not first. He wanted to be always the “lesser brother,” not the founder of an order. And so he would often go on pilgrimages and ask others to run things. Or he would sit at the feet of his brothers at communal meetings and if an issue could not be resolved without his say-so, he would whisper in the leader's ear.

#### A VISION OF HOLINESS

As Jesus was without politics, so was Francis. As Jesus fled from crowds, so did Francis—often to bare shacks in woodlands, to pray and be with God and nature. It's critical to recall that he did not do this in rebellion against orthodoxy or even church authority. He obeyed orders from bishops and even the pope himself. His main obsession wasn't nature, which came to sublime fruition in his final “Canticle of the Sun,” but the cleanliness of the cloths, chalices, and ornaments surrounding the holy eucharist.

His revulsion at even the hint of comfort or wealth could be extreme. As he lay dying and was offered a pillow to rest on, he slept through the night only to wake the next day in a rage, hitting the monk who had given him the pillow and recoiling in disgust at his own weakness in accepting its balm. One of his few commands was that his brothers never ride a horse; they had to walk or ride a donkey. What inspired his fellow Christians to rebuild and reform the church in his day was simply his own example of humility, service, and sanctity.

A modern person would see such a man



**JOEL OSTEEN**, evangelical author and televangelist, advocating a version of the prosperity gospel:

**“God wants to increase you financially, by giving you promotions, fresh ideas, creativity ... Think big. Think increase. Think abundance. Think more than enough.”**



**RICK SANTORUM**, Roman Catholic candidate for president:

**“One of the things I will talk about that no president has talked about before is ... the dangers of contraception. It's not OK ... to do things in the sexual realm that [are] counter to how things are supposed to be.”**



**WILLIAM DONOHUE**, president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, on sex scandals in the church:

**“There's a growing consensus on the part of the bishops that they had better ... go out and buy some good lawyers to get tough.”**



**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA**, speaking at the National Prayer Breakfast on Feb. 2:

**“When I talk about making sure insurance companies aren't discriminating against those who are already sick ... I do so because ... I believe in God's command to 'love thy neighbor as thyself.'”**

as crazy, and there were many at the time who thought so too. He sang sermons in the streets, sometimes just miming them. He suffered intense bouts of doubt, self-loathing, and depression. He had visions. You could have diagnosed his postwar conversion as an outgrowth of posttraumatic-stress disorder. Or you can simply observe what those around him testified to: something special, unique, mysterious, holy. To reduce one's life to essentials, to ask merely for daily bread, forgiveness of others, and denial of self is, in many ways, a form of madness. It is also a form of liberation. It lets go of complexity and focuses on simplicity. Francis did not found an order designed to think or control. He insisted on the simplicity of manual labor, prayer, and the sacraments. That was enough for him.

#### LEARNING HOW TO LIVE

It wouldn't be enough for most of us. And yet, there can be wisdom in the acceptance of mystery. I've pondered the

Incarnation my whole life. I've read theology and history. I think I grasp what it means to be both God and human—but I don't think my understanding is any richer than my Irish grandmother's. Barely literate, she would lose herself in the rosary at mass. In her simplicity, beneath her veil in front of a cascade of flickering candles, she seemed to know God more deeply than I, with all my education and privilege, ever will.

This doesn't imply, as some claim, the privatization of faith, or its relegation to a subordinate sphere. There are times when great injustices—slavery, imperialism, totalitarianism, segregation—require spiritual mobilization and public witness. But from Gandhi to King, the greatest examples of these movements renounce power as well. They embrace nonviolence as a moral example, and that paradox changes the world more than politics or violence ever can or will. When politics is necessary, as it is, the kind of Christianity I am describing seeks always to translate reli-

gious truths into reasoned, secular arguments that can appeal to those of other faiths and none at all. But it also means, at times, renouncing Caesar in favor of the Christ to whom Jefferson, Francis, my grandmother, and countless generations of believers have selflessly devoted themselves.

The saints, after all, became known as saints not because of their success in fighting political battles, or winning a few news cycles, or funding an anti-abortion super PAC. They were saints purely and simply because of the way they lived. And this, of course, was Jefferson's deeply American insight: "No man can conform his faith to the dictates of another. The life and essence of religion consists in the internal persuasion or belief of the mind."

Jefferson feared that the alternative to a Christianity founded on "internal persuasion" was a revival of the brutal, bloody wars of religion that America was founded to escape. And what he grasped in his sacrilegious mutilation of a sacred text was the core simplicity of Jesus' message of renunciation. He believed that stripped of the doctrines of the Incarnation, Resurrection, and the various miracles, the message of Jesus was the deepest miracle. And that it was radically simple. It was explained in stories, parables, and metaphors—not theological doctrines of immense complexity. It was proven by his willingness to submit himself to an unjustified execution. The cross itself was not the point; nor was the intense physical suffering he endured. The point was how he conducted himself through it all—

calm, loving, accepting, radically surrendering even the basic control of his own body and telling us that this was what it means to truly transcend our world and be with God. Jesus, like Francis, was a homeless person, as were his closest followers. He possessed nothing—and thereby everything.

#### CHRISTIANITY RESURRECTED

I have no concrete idea how Christianity will wrestle free of its current crisis, of its distractions and temptations, and above all its enmeshment with the things of this world. But I do know it won't happen by even more furious denunciations of others, by focusing on politics rather than prayer, by concerning ourselves with the sex lives and heretical thoughts of others rather than with the constant struggle to liberate ourselves from what keeps us from God. What Jefferson saw in Jesus of Nazareth was utterly compatible with reason and with the future; what Saint Francis trusted in was the simple, terrifying love of God for Creation itself. That never ends.

This Christianity comes not from the head or the gut, but from the soul. It is as meek as it is quietly liberating. It does not seize the moment; it lets it be. It doesn't seek worldly recognition, or success, and it flees from power and wealth. It is the religion of unachievement. And it is not afraid. In the anxious, crammed lives of our modern twittering souls, in the materialist obsessions we cling to for security in recession, in a world where sectarian extremism threatens to unleash mass destruction, this sheer Christianity, seeking truth without the expectation of resolution, simply living each day doing what we can to fulfill God's will, is more vital than ever. It may, in fact, be the only spiritual transformation that can in the end transcend the nagging emptiness of our late-capitalist lives, or the cult of distracting contemporaneity, or the threat of apocalyptic war where Jesus once walked. You see attempts to find this everywhere—from experimental spirituality to resurgent fundamentalism. Something inside is telling us we need radical spiritual change.

But the essence of this change has been with us, and defining our own civilization, for two millennia. And one day soon, when politics and doctrine and pride recede, it will rise again. **HW**



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A modern person would see Saint Francis as crazy, and many in his lifetime thought so, too.