

Another look at Jesus Before Christianity

Thomas C. Fox | Jul. 26, 2012 NCR Today

A few days ago, I [posted on this blog](#) [1] an essay written by one of my favorite theologians, Regina Schulte. Today I am posting another essay she recently wrote, a book review, which appeared in [Corpus Reports](#) [2].

However, the book and the review both deserve wider attention. So with permission of the author I am sharing with you Schulte's thoughts on the Nolan book, *Jesus Before Christianity*, [available through Orbis books](#) [3].

JESUS BEFORE CHRISTIANITY

Albert Nolan

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976 (first printing)

196 pages, soft cover, \$15.00

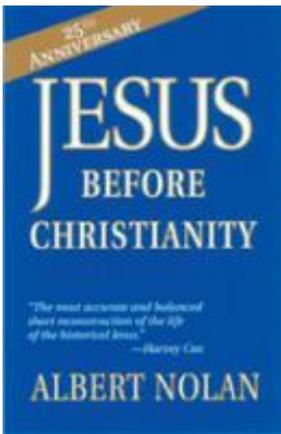
Why this book has made little or no splash in Christian thought is puzzling, and how it has eluded the Vatican's watchdogs all these years is amazing. It makes so much sense! Last year was the 25th anniversary of its first printing; yet, it seems as astonishingly relevant as when it first appeared.

The author's specific purpose sets this study apart from many past efforts to find Jesus in his human skin. At the outset, he makes clear that this is not an attempt to convert anyone, not a defense of Christian faith, not a merely academic pursuit. Nolan admits to being moved by an "urgent and practical purpose."

"I am concerned about people; the daily sufferings of so many millions of people, and the prospect of much greater suffering in the near future. My purpose is to find out what can be done about it."

The all-inclusive political and economic system we have created has brought our world to the brink of disaster. Organized religion has offered little help, and sometimes has even exacerbated the problems. Jesus of Nazareth lived in a time and place that had problems similar to ours, albeit on a much smaller scale. The author wishes to find what, if anything, Jesus sought to do about them. What purpose drove his choice of mission?

"Context" is the guiding principle for this study: the socio-politico-religious environment contemporary to Jesus vis a vis our world today. Faith was not a pre-requisite for the author and neither is it for the reader.



To allow Jesus to speak for himself, Nolan set aside all preconceived notions about him—including that he is divine or the Messiah, or the savior of the world, as well as any assumptions that he was not any of these. Knowing that historical objectivity is always to some degree imperfect, Nolan chose our contemporary situation as the place to stand for the most unobstructed view of Jesus within his environment. The picture of that world is critical to a correct interpretation of what we read in the Gospels, and the author has researched it well.

From non-biblical sources he finds knowledge of the social mores, politics, Jewish religious traditions, the variety of Jewish sects operating among Jesus' contemporaries, and even the way time was measured (very different from ours). Then, situating the gospel texts in that cultural frame, Nolan goes to work as methodically as would an ace detective. He looks for connections, clues, and contradictions that may shed light on a Jesus stripped of all aura in which Christian belief has clothed him.

Jesus was at first attracted to John the Baptist who, in the ancient prophetic tradition, was preaching repentance and conversion to save Jerusalem from impending disaster. But, upon John's death, Jesus decided to take a different, more positive path. He would reveal a way of living and began spreading the good news about a "kingdom" in which people could be liberated from oppression.

It is a misunderstanding to locate this "kingdom of heaven/God" in an otherworldly, afterlife existence. Rather, it was a just way of living here (on earth) and now (not in an afterlife). In fact, the concept of an afterlife in heaven was unknown to Jesus and his contemporaries. The kingdom of heaven would replace the established system, the kingdom of Satan. Key elements of the latter were: 1) money, 2) prestige, 3) exclusive group solidarities, and 4) power. (Sound familiar?) A chapter is devoted to each of these, demonstrating how embedded they were in the socio-political-religious fabric of those times. The recognition of these dynamics in the twenty-first century will surely come easily to readers.

A defining characteristic of Jesus was compassion for the suffering, the poor, and all those rendered powerless by their socio-economic status. This is significant because by birth Jesus was not one of the poor. Nolan places him in the middleclass, his only social taint being that he came from Nazareth—a small town with an unsavory reputation. To identify with the lower classes (in which there were many tiers) was taboo; Jesus' stooping to do so was, therefore, scandalous to "proper" people.

Ignoring religious and societal conventions, he associated with the undesirables and often shared meals—sometimes himself doing the inviting. Since physical and mental infirmities were believed to be the effects of sin, and sinners were corrupted persons, his forgiveness of sin and healings were seen to be liberation from both. Compassion for the poor, the sick, the powerless, was the *sine qua non* of the kingdom, which Jesus was initiating. He severely criticized religious authorities' misuse of laws, creating additional burdens for the people. In other words, Jesus identified with the lower classes and was actively seeking a better way of living

for them. This was a movement, not a religion, says Nolan.

Although most readers of this book will be quite familiar with the gospel narratives, they will find surprising new insights in them. What Nolan's research adds (and sometimes subtracts) is very enlightening. One of the most surprising twists concerns Jesus' requirement to love the enemy. There is more than merely a general principle in that; it had an immediate political purpose. Jesus knew that mounting a revolt to overthrow Roman rule would be a total disaster for the Jews; they would be annihilated. The better course of action was to get along with them—to learn to love and forgive the enemy.

The Jesus that Nolan uncovers in this search provides some clues for dealing with today's impending disaster. Plus, as a bonus for our faith, he finds a divinity in a Jesus that is at once both less than and munificently greater than the one Christianity has heretofore presented.

Nevertheless, readers will undoubtedly have questions: Was Jesus really God? Were those miracles really "real"? Did he foretell his violent death? Was Jesus' resurrection a literal, historical event? Was he the Messiah? Did God become man to atone for sin? How is Jesus the Redeemer? What does "Son of Man" mean? Did Jesus found a Church? ordain the apostles? Etc. Along the way, such concerns move with Nolan's purposes and surface when appropriate. He gives credible answers, some of which can be taken as "both yes and no." That is, "Yes, but not in the way you've been accustomed to think." His hypotheses do not require readers to set aside their intelligence or engage in mental contortions, but they will ask that we rethink our Christology.

It is no exaggeration to say that the wrap-up in the last three chapters (all chapters are but a few pages each) is powerful enough to turn our ways of thinking about Jesus and God upside down—quite literally. In fact, Nolan points out the necessity of our rearranging them in that way. By arguing from God to Jesus, as our theology has always done, we are placing the cart before the horse, he says. We must start with Jesus and learn about God from him, because Jesus alone is our source about divinity. He alone is the Word of God. We must deduce everything about God from what we know about Jesus. This will necessitate a wholly new way of envisioning God.

By his words and his praxis, Jesus himself changed the content of the word "God". To choose Jesus as our God is to make him the source of our information about divinity and to refuse to superimpose upon him our own ideas about it. If it is Jesus and what he stands for that we choose to identify with, to guide and give value to our lives, then he is our God; he is divine for us.

Jesus did not ever claim divine titles or divine authority; he claimed to know the truth and implied that he was in immediate contact with the truth—that in him the truth had taken flesh. In the last analysis faith is not a way of speaking or a way of acting, it is a way of living and can be adequately articulated only in a living praxis.

If we wish to treat [Jesus] as our God, we would have to conclude that our God does not want to be served by us, but wants to serve us; God does not want to be given the highest possible rank and status in our society, but wants to take the lowest place and to be without any rank or status; God does not want to be feared and obeyed, but wants to be recognized in the sufferings of the poor and the weak; God is not supremely indifferent and detached, but is irrevocably committed to the liberation of humankind, for God has chosen to be identified with all people in a spirit of solidarity and compassion.

From the gospels, Nolan shows us what Jesus was like; if this is not a true picture of God, then Nolan claims that Jesus is not divine.

We must set aside all the traditional images of a personal God in order to find our God in Jesus and what he

stood for. ?God is more human, more thoroughly humane, than any human being.? Jesus is truly, ?the Word? of God, and to avoid the ultimate crisis on planet earth requires that we learn from the principles that guided him.

After stating in the introduction that faith in Jesus is not our starting point for this book, Nolan went on to say that he hoped it would be our conclusion. And what a conclusion it is that he brings to us. It is consonant with our twenty-first century world-view, and, therefore, it speaks to our crises? our economical inequalities and ecological disasters.

Faith in Jesus is not a way of thinking or of speaking, it is a way of living. It is identifying with all people and begins with compassion for all. It begins with ?reading the signs of the times? and recognizing that all the forces working against humanity are the forces of evil. Too many of us have for too long been basing our lives upon the worldly values of money, possessions, prestige, status, privilege, power and upon the group solidarities of family, race, class, party, religion and nationalism. ?To make these our supreme values is to have nothing in common with Jesus.?

Faith is not adhering to ingredients in a creed. It is power! When persons thanked Jesus for healing them, he would respond that it was their faith that had saved them. Faith is the power of God in a motive, a drive, an incentive that can mobilize the world, that can make us willing to redistribute the world?s wealth and population, that can be strong enough to replace the profit motive. Faith power can resist ?the system? and keep it from destroying us. It is the power of goodness and truth, the power of God. Faith in Jesus is a way of living, of choosing him to be our God.

?We do not need to theorize about him, we need to re-produce him in our time and our circumstances.?

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[3] <http://www.maryknollsocietymall.org/description.cfm?ISBN=978-1-57075-404-3>