

THE LAMB AND THE LION
or THE GREEK PASSION

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THE psalmists were the singers of Israel; daily they magnified the name of the Lord, crying *Hosanna!*, *Hosanna!* . . . Today the crooner has become one of those psalmists. By means of the microphone, to a billion families and homes, he sends the same message—*I believe, I believe.* . . . His has become the voice of Sunday morning religion. His Nicene Creed is a short catalogue—a simple reverence of Nature's holiness, a worshipping of trees and stars and clouds, a palpitating delight in the first cries of newborn babes. Doubtless such sentiments are easy to ridicule;¹ they can be dismissed as clichéd or Pantheistic—or even if they are conceded to have a Christian note of optimism, then the Christianity which they celebrate may be considered rather wishy-washy. Nor is it hard for those who argue thus to add examples. They can instance 'The Book'—a current 'hit' on both sides of the Atlantic. 'There's a book': that book was given to the singer by his mother—no other; its leaves are edged with gold, its pages hold the wisdom of the ages. . . . Is that book the Bible? The answer remains anybody's guess because next Sunday a billion listeners must decide. . . . In 'The Bridge', another current song, the theme is more explicit: for those prepared to seek redemption lies across 'the bridge'. The note of the negro 'spiritual' is apparent in this number, as it is also in the American number, 'What this Country Needs is a Good Old-Fashioned Talk with the Lord'. The same note of the 'spiritual' is apparent too in 'Answer Me, My Lord', which the English B.B.C. will only allow to be broadcast as 'Answer Me, My Love'.

This has been an excursion—a strange introduction perhaps to a novel about the Greek Orthodox Church. Yet this introduction (in a climate other than the Mediterranean) may

¹ See *Sunday Dispatch*, January 31st, 1954.

best give a hint of this book's breadth. For in *Christ Recrucified*² the author attempts nothing less than a contemporary portrait of Christ. His theme relates myth, history and present reality; in his vision hills become valleys, and Calvary and Hiroshima lie along the same plain.

A group of Greek peasants decide to stage a Passion Play. No sooner are their parts cast than they find their village confronted by a band of refugees. The elders shut their doors against them; so also does the local priest, Pope Grigoris. Like the early Christians, these refugees are forced to take shelter in the caves. ('These caves in the belly of our earth are our catacombs.') Meanwhile in the village those who have been selected to act in the Passion Play begin to doubt the wisdom of their elders; the more that they think about their roles, the more they side with those banished to the mountains. They begin to see in their own Pope Grigoris the figure of Anti-Christ, whereas in the priest of the refugees, Pope Fotis, they find an apostle. Gradually Manolios, who is to play Christ, becomes the village scapegoat; regarded as a fool by Pope Grigoris's followers, he becomes the friend of Pope Fotis. As the shadow of the Cross lengthens over their two lives, so does there grow within them a deeper realization of the folly of the Cross. Time is bridged and the meaning of redemption brought closer. It is a case of seeking, but to search is of no avail unless first one has been made pure of heart. They listen to the words of the psalmist. . . .

Seven years previously Manolios's part was played by Charalambis. Then the actor was infected with such religious mania that on Easter Day he had deserted his wife, left his children to beg, and sought sanctuary in a monastery. Now, as Manolios prepares for the part, he becomes infected with a form of facial elephantiasis; he still harbours thoughts of women and, as his lust mounts, so do the swellings in his cheeks. His body is the counter of his mind; both must be purified if they are to receive the true imprint of Christ. Charalambis had been too fanatical; Manolios has remained too tepid. He has to learn not to seek the divine countenance

² *Christ Recrucified*. By Nikos Kazantzakis. Translated by Jonathan Griffin. (Bruno Cassirer, 1954; 15s.)

in images. In passing he thinks of the iconostasis in the chapel, 'the long blue tunic', the 'bare feet which touched the ground so lightly that the blades of grass were not even bent'; the figure that was 'thin, transparent, weightless like a mist'. 'From His hands, from His feet and from His uncovered chest there flowed a thin thread of rose-pink blood.' Yet this is distant and pale portraiture, for ever since Holman Hunt painted *The Light of the World* this figure has grown paler. Repository art has furthered this mistiness: in the place of the virility of the early masters there has come effeminacy of feature; instead of blood, drops of rose-water have been substituted. For billions, Christ's portrait has been reproduced as anaemic and wishy-washy.³

This has been ill in the spreading of a living Christianity and in some small fashion it may account for why so many of the working classes have been lost to the Church—Greek Orthodox as well as Roman. For the question is this: how can a living, tough, muscular interpretation of Christ be matched with the living, tough, muscular figure of the Gospels?

Remember, the evangelists draw Christ the lion as well as Christ the shepherd. (Manolios is a shepherd who proves himself a lion.) Yet today all religious painting concentrates on Christ the shepherd. One of Kazantzakis's characters here makes the comment that if Christ returned today he would not carry a Cross on his shoulders, but a petrol-can. This is a double image, I submit. Petrol would burn the villagers of Anti-Christ out of their complacency as Christ in his own day whipped the money-lenders out of the Temple; and again as Christ was whipped on the way to Calvary; so were Christ alive now it is more than probable that he would not be crucified but burnt. Those who survived Hiroshima were forced to carry their burns like crosses. That might be one contemporary reading. Or another might be this. Remember that Christ was a Jew;

³ Last year I bought a crib. I chose a Dutch set because of the clear blues, reds and greens. The assistant seemed disappointed. 'It's not like our English conception', she said, pointing at a set whose angels were the colour of 'strawberry crush'. I was reminded of the bedroom suites of rich film stars.

remember the Reichstag Trials. . . . Or another. The indiscriminate use of petroleum hurts the sea; spawning grounds become barren, whole peoples starve.⁴ 'Believe me', as Pope Fotis says to Manolios, '[He] is not always as you carved him in the wood . . . kindly, easy, pacific, turning the other cheek when He receives a blow. He is also a resolute warrior, who advances followed by all the disinherited of the earth. "Think not that I came to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword." Whose words are those? Christ's. Henceforward the face of our Christ is like that.' The pope's interpretation is simple—straight from the Gospels. He argues the principle of the just war and applies it to the fed and starving, to the villagers of Lycrovissi and his own hungry band of refugees. Remember, it may at times be good to be a sheep, but when a man is hemmed in by wolves, it is better for him to be a lion. God helps those who help themselves, declares the proverb. 'If you don't stir, God doesn't stir either', declares Pope Fotis. 'We've got to go down to the village and pinch what we can.' For this is a variation on the old story. As the Italian priest, Father Villari, commented in the last century: 'If the Church will not march with the working classes, not for that will the working classes stay their march'; and that is precisely what has happened to the Mediterranean society of which Kazantzakis is writing. Both the Roman and Greek Orthodox Churches have to win back their working classes.

Down in the Lycrovissi valley with its fertile plains, rich vineyards and peaceful prosperity the elders oppressed by a rich Church had robbed the peasantry and, in retaliation, the peasantry had given less and less of their tithes to the Church. Over the years this had become a tightening circle. Each for himself! The weakest to the wall! Religion can be stored for old age! When therefore the Turks had razed a neighbouring town to the ground and its refugees came begging hospitality, the elders of the village had conferred, finding in the possibility of plague a reason to bar their doors. They had forgotten that 'no man is an island entire of himself', that 'men must love one another or die'. 'Don't

⁴ See David Jones's work: *In Parenthesis* (1937) and *The Anathemata* (1953).

make distinctions between "yours" and "mine", Pope Fotis had warned Pope Grigoris. 'All the souls of the world are hung round a man's neck.' So the two popes had gone their different ways; the valleys and hills remained separate; Hiroshima and Calvary were not yet on the same plain. For so full of implications is this book that, like Thomas Mann's trilogy about Joseph and Jacob, it is not until a reader is more than half way that the three levels on which the novel is constructed become clear. The pages which one feels might be 'cut' in the first part prove essential to the second and third parts. Myth, history and the present all dovetail, forming a trinity that in the last chapter shows itself to have been indivisible from the beginning; and here perhaps is the place to raise an issue that comes more and more to the front as such phrases as 'the Catholic novel' fall into common usage.

Can one, for instance, speak of the apostolate of the novel as one speaks of the apostolate of medicine as part of the whole movement called the Lay Apostolate? Certainly there is a temptation to use such a new phrase, but one must be wary. In fiction the barrier between art and propaganda is wide, though there are times when it also seems perilously close. Novels can be written to order, but they are seldom works of art. How then can one say of a novel not written to order that it may yet form part of what tentatively may be called the apostolate of the novel? Is there not a contradiction in terms here?

Suppose an atheist were to find this novel. He remembers Athens before the first World War. He has heard Kazantzakis spoken of highly by friends. He believes that on several occasions the author has been in the running for the Nobel Prize. The translation seems to be extraordinarily good; the story appears an exciting one. Irrespective of Christ's divinity, this reader thinks of what works of art the Crucifixion has inspired. Whether the event was true or not, the story has all the qualities of a myth; the theme makes epics possible. A man giving his life for his beliefs, accepting his lot—these are noble virtues in any character. So the pages are flicked through. The book falls open at Chapter VII.

'The first of May. Summer is coming. In the still green

plain the corn is already turning to gold, the olives are knotting and growing, vines are adorning themselves with little acid clusters, a bitter milk flows in the green figs which will soon be all honey. The inhabitants . . . are eating garlic to keep themselves well—the whole village reeks of it. Old Patriarcheas is beginning once more to keep good cheer; he has become pot-bellied, his blood has thickened. The other morning Andonis the barber cupped him to save him from a stroke. Old Ladas too munches a sprig of garlic without thinking of it, while his spirit wanders between debit and credit: how much oil, wine, corn will he harvest this year? who owes him money, how much, and how is he to get it back? He thinks also of Yannakos's three pounds; he means to put his goods to auction and to get hold of his donkey.

'The betrothed languish. In May, no weddings; in June there is the work in the fields, no time for marriage-feasts. Then, the month after that, there is the threshing; the month after that, the wine harvest. They must wait till Holy Cross Day, in September, when there is less to do; when the harvest is being reckoned up. Then the pope will come and bless the new couples who, with many cares out of their way, will have plenty of bread and oil to eat, and wine to drink. That will give them the vigour to beget and bring forth children. . . .'

The hours slip by. The first chapter is read; then the second. The plot begins to unfold. In more than one sense Manolios comes to the front of the stage; he appears a fighter, and between reader and player there is immediate self-identification. The actor becomes a mirror—as indeed every man is a mirror of Christ. Time stands still. Greece can hardly have changed at all. The struggle between the elders and the peasants is exactly what it was before the '14-'18 war—indeed, exactly what it was when Christ drove the money-lenders from the Temple. History repeats itself and human nature does not change. The atheist feels his conscience eased. Other figures shadow Manolios—Robin Hood, Sir Percy Blakeney, Lawrence of Arabia. Fact and fiction mix with myth and reality. 'Manolios is a Bolshevik', shouts one of the villagers from Lycrovissi. 'Christ is the

first Communist' was once a well-worn Oxford tag; recently it has become more widespread. Christ as Raffles! The headmaster had been shocked; at Balliol the master had been less narrow-minded. But it was nearer the truth than Holman Hunt, nearer what the man might have been, nearer me. . . . There are vague stirrings, historic undertones and overtones. Christ the leader of the disinherited; Manolios the leader of the oppressed; myself?—myself the sympathizer with the underdog. For in seeking reflected glory the heart naturally looks to other brave hearts. Again, as bravery creates myths, and myths add to that bravery, so however directly a man may link himself to a Messiah-figure, so to that extent will he find in the link an element of truth because in actual fact he is using the link as a comparison with himself. This might be called the atheist's unknowing acceptance of the divine image in man. Hopkins understood this idea when he wrote his poem. 'The Soldier':

Mark Christ our King . . .

. . . [who] seeing somewhere some man do all that man
can do,

For love he leans forth, needs his neck must fall on, kiss,
And cry 'O Christ-done deed! So God-made-flesh does
too:

Were I come o'er again' cries Christ 'it should be this.'

Yet it must be added that this is not one of Hopkins' best short poems; nor is it over-clear. A gloss may be helpful. James Reeves⁵ has commented: 'Christ was a soldier. . . . When he sees a deed nobly done, he loves and praises the doer: we, formed in Christ's image, do likewise. If Christ were to come again, it would be in the likeness of a brave man.'

Christ Recrucified needs no such gloss. The contemporary portrait it presents is muscular, living and tough; it provides in its own vernacular a vital and full-blooded picture. There are no pastel shades, nothing wishy-washy. There is beef in the writing as there is beef in the words of the psalmists; and, when religion and religious painting have become so anaemic and pale, there is much to be said for beef. If Ernest

⁵ *Selected Poems*. By Gerard Manley Hopkins. Edited by James Reeves (1953).

Hemingway has described men and women as dumb oxen it is worth remembering that St Thomas Aquinas was also called an ox. The Scriptures are full of descriptions of men as strong as oxen; Christ's stable at Bethlehem was watched over by an ox. Yet the Scriptures and psalms—the whole Bible—hold faint memories in the conscious mind of the modern world. To a billion listeners every Sunday 'The Book' remains anybody's guess; and the network of broadcasting stations on both sides of the Atlantic are anxious to keep it this way. So one speaks again of the apostolate of the novel. For in its breadth *Christ Recrucified* links not only psalmist and crooner, but the psalmist's lament over Sodom with Christ's tears spilt over Jerusalem for Hiroshima.



POINTS OF VIEW

PEACE OR WAR

THE December issue of your periodical—a copy of which has recently come my way—is devoted almost entirely to the question of peace, and much emphasis is placed upon the theory that wars are the product of personal delinquencies; one after another your contributors return to the theme of individual strife and reiterate the familiar scholastic notion that peace is 'of the spirit'; there seems almost a contempt for regarding the term 'peace' as the mere absence of international slaughter. Yet it is in this latter sense that the word is normally understood in everyday conversation, in newspapers and in public utterances, and we are entitled to suppose that prayers in the Mass for 'peace in our days' and 'security from all disturbance' were, if not exclusively, at least primarily concerned with the 'mere' cessation or absence of wars. The elimination of international war may be held to be the most pressing of modern problems. In view of human imperfections, it is perhaps fortunate that the possibility of abolishing this curse is not dependent upon the supernatural inner peace stressed by your writers, as the