Chapter 1

Why They Attempt to Tell the Stories

Religious Backgrounds and Motivations

The five authors come from a variety of traditions, though none are traditional Christians. This distinction can largely be explained by the fact that traditional Christians tend to simply expand on the gospel accounts rather than making significant changes to them; they see no need to change the gospel story, as it has already been told truthfully in the Bible.¹ It takes a certain renegade spirit to want to try to tell it again (and, perhaps, better), and it takes a certain amount of hubris. Most of them do, however, have some sort of religious background, with Saramago being the notable exception. Their differing religious backgrounds help influence their interpretations of Jesus and the events surrounding his life, providing widely divergent views.

Anthony Burgess, like many Irish writers, was raised Roman Catholic, and, again, like many Irish writers, later left the church, but not its influence. Like many Irish boys, Burgess went to a Catholic elementary school where there was “the inevitable presence of the one terror-inspiring nun who figured prominently both in school lore and nightmare . . .” (Stinson 2). However, Burgess did not feel any particular ill will toward his parents, the school, or any teachers at the school for his time there.

He gave up practicing his faith when he was sixteen years old: “He began reading philosophy and studying metaphysics on his own, and about

¹There have been numerous retellings from the traditional Christian viewpoint. While a study of those works would be interesting and enlightening, it is not my purpose to do so in this book. Interestingly, even Reynolds Price, who is a Christian but who also drew from some apocryphal gospels and other historical sources, comes out with a fairly traditional interpretation in his “An Honest Account of a Memorable Life,” his approach to a gospel in Three Gospels.
the age of sixteen, he decided he was through with Catholicism. But it was a renunciation that gave him little joy; although intellectually he was convinced he could be a freethinker, emotionally he was very much aware of Hell and damnation” (Aggeler 5). Burgess, though, does not like to say that he renounced his faith: “I say that I lost my faith, but really I was no more than a lapsed Catholic . . . For Catholicism is, in a paradox, a bigger thing than the faith. It is a kind of nationality one is stuck with forever. Or, rather, a supranationality that makes one despise small patriotisms. . . . Again, the Catholic Church, since it preaches a philosophy as well as a theology, leaves the renegade with certain convictions that he does not have to square with religious belief” (Little Wilson 148).

Thus, his Catholic background still heavily influenced his work, though he died in 1993 formally broken with the church. It is odd, though, what beliefs do still influence him. Geoffrey Aggeler writes, “With regard to religion, Burgess still maintains a ‘renegade Catholic’ stance that is oddly conservative in some respects. He despises liberal Catholicism, which seems to have become another religion in the process of gaining acceptance in the modern world. The ecumenical movement repels him, as do the liturgical changes and the use of the vernacular” (27). Concerning the new Mass, Burgess wrote, “The vernacular Mass was a disgrace. I had met priests in America who no longer knew what they believed in. It was considered virtuous for a cardinal to have forgotten his penny catechism and say that love and love alone counted. The cult of a fat personality had driven out the old intellectual rigour of the faith” (You’ve Had Your Time 349).

Despite all his attempts to completely break from the church, though, he found that harder to do as he grew older: “In old age I look back on various attempts to cancel my apostasy and become reconciled to the church again. This is because I have found no metaphysical substitute for it. . . . I know of no other organisation that can both explain evil and, theoretically at least, brandish arms against it. The Church has let its children down too often to be regarded as a good mother, but it is the only mother we have” (LW 149). And, thus, “like Joyce and Dedalus, Burgess was still supersaturated with a Catholicism he allowed to lapse long ago” (Stinson 2).
Burgess wrote the screenplay to *Jesus of Nazareth*, which was directed by Franco Zeffirelli. *Man of Nazareth* is supposedly the novelized version, more or less, of that screenplay. However, there is evidence to suggest that Burgess was working on both projects at the same time, so it is unclear which one influenced the other. Stinson writes, “The book jacket of the novel *Man of Nazareth* (1979) states that it is the novel on which the television series, *Jesus of Nazareth*, was based. Some Burgess remarks, however, seem to indicate that the creation of the novel and the miniseries were nearly simultaneous—that he was writing the novel during intervals when he was not being pressed for script revision” (137–38).

Burgess, in one of his autobiographies, *You’ve Had Your Time*, implied that he had indeed been writing the screenplay and the novel at the same time, as he finished the novel just after the series concluded filming: “The work of writing the novel, provisionally entitled *Christ the Tiger*, ended in Ansedonia, among bodies honeyed by the sun by the sea and black hair smelling of woodsmoke. Surrounded by animal calls of the pagans, I resuscitated the dead Christ.” Burgess went on in this passage to show that he made changes from his ideas for the screenplay because Zeffirelli rejected them: “Zeffirelli was not quite orthodox in wishing to end the series with a great Pietà. . . . He had to be reminded, gently, that the Resurrection was the whole point of the death. . . . I could see his point; artistically speaking, the Resurrection is something of an anticlimax” (307). He also had to adjust the screenplay for theologians who were brought in to consult, which he did not have to do for the novel: “Gennarino Gennarini [an Italian theologian] and his colleagues never read the novel out of which the script was squeezed or hacked. They would not have been pleased by my presenting Christ as a married man” (306).

To prepare for the writing of *Jesus of Nazareth*, Burgess felt that he had to do a great deal of research. He not only read and reread the gospels, he read them in Greek, but he felt he had to go beyond even that approach: “The gospels were not enough. I had to read Josephus’s *History of the Jews* and

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1Oddly enough, Price went the other way: after spending years translating the gospels in an attempt to understand them better, he decided to try to write one of his own (28).
manuals on the technique of crucifixion. The traditional image of Christ carrying the whole cross, dear to the fundamentalists of the American South, apparently flouted historical fact. He would have carried merely the crosspiece, which would then be affixed to a permanent upright at the place of execution” (YH 304).

What ultimately motivates Burgess to tell this story again is what motivates many authors; the story is a compelling story, but it is poorly told: “The more I read Matthew, Mark and Luke the more I became dissatisfied with their telling of the sacred story. They remain fine propagandists but mediocre novelists. ‘The devil entered Judas,’ says John. How hopelessly inadequate” (YH 304).

In an interesting contrast Marianne Fredriksson wrote According to Mary Magdalene exactly because we can never know what truly happened, and she wants to highlight that fact. She was inspired by a quote from Simone Weil in The Person and the Sacred: “A correct understanding of Christianity has become almost an impossibility for us owing to the profound secrecy surrounding the early history of time” (ix). Thus, rather than trying to lay out characters who know exactly what happened, she focuses on the contrast between what her Mary Magdalene saw and what Peter and Paul are teaching. Thus, she draws on and directly quotes both the Gospel of Mary and many biblical books, such as Paul’s letters to the Corinthians, I Peter, and the gospel of John.

Christopher Moore, author of Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal, tends to agree with Fredriksson: “I researched Lamb, I really did, but there is no doubt I could have spent decades researching and still managed to be inaccurate” (438). He knows that there are multiple views, even among scholars who have devoted their lives to studying Jesus’ life and culture. He points out that “some historians postulate that Yeshua of Nazareth would have been little more than an ignorant hillbilly, while others say that because of the proximity of Sepphoris and Joppa, he could have been exposed to Greek and Roman culture from an early age. I chose the latter because it makes for a more interesting story” (439). Despite Moore’s assertion that no amount of research would enable him to be completely
accurate, he went so far as to tour Israel in an effort to find out as much as
he could in a reasonable amount of time.

Unlike the three authors previously mentioned, Nikos Kazantzakis was
definitely religious. In fact, his purpose in writing *The Last Temptation of Christ*
was so that “every free man who reads this book, so filled as it is with love, will
more than ever before, love Christ” (4). However, he did not follow traditional
Christianity at all. Middleton and Bien write, “Although Kazantzakis attempts
in his oeuvre to make sense of divine and human becoming, we probably
should not think of him as Christian—certainly not as Christian in a narrow
sense. . . . Another way of saying that he was a profoundly religious person is
to describe him as a true witness, by which we mean someone who acts in a
fashion that makes no sense at all if God does not exist” (7–8).

This break from traditional Christianity came early in his life: “Even
as a youngsters, Kazantzakis was agitated by spiritual turmoil. He enjoyed
kicking over the traces, disrupting schoolroom activities, and probing
teachers with uncomfortable questions” (Middleton and Bien 2). He later
traveled extensively, searching for new ideas; one of his ways of doing this
was to spend time at monasteries where he would have long discussions with
the monks (Middleton and Bien 4).

He was searching not just for answers to his religious questions,
but for a new faith altogether. In her biography of Kazantzakis, Helen
Kazantzakis, his daughter, writes, “To found a religion, to found a
religion at all costs, this was the obsession haunting Kazantzakis over a
long span of years, driving to the farthest extreme his innate tendencies
toward asceticism and renunciation sanctified by laughter. After harsh
struggles, he came to realize and know that the ‘new myth’ had escaped
him” (61). He revealed one of the aspects of this religion in a letter to
his friend, E. Samios: “The third and highest stage [of enlightenment in
my religion] is: ‘We are fighting neither for ourselves nor for man. All
of us, voluntarily or involuntarily, consciously or unconsciously—plants,
animals, human beings and ideas—are struggling for the salvation of God’”
(H. Kazantzakis 27). While this may be evidence of a deep spirituality, it
is not traditional Christianity.
This struggle with God seems to be a theme in all of Kazantzakis’ works. In a letter to Börje Knös, he argues that it may be his only theme: “The major and almost the only theme of all my work is the struggle of man with ‘God’: the unyielding, inextinguishable struggle of the naked worm called ‘man’ against the terrifying power and darkness of the forces within him and around him” (qtd. in H. Kazantzakis 507). Middleton and Bien agree with his assessment when they write, “The more one considers Kazantzakis’s life, especially his formative years, the more one comes to appreciate his work as an extended diatribe against spiritual mediocrity” (5). His daughter wrote that Kazantzakis “was not an angel, but a profoundly religious nature, seeking God with determination, demanding that He be a just and liberating God” (23). Kazantzakis struggled with his idea of God, seeking to understand Him and convey that understanding, or at least the struggle, through his writing. While he certainly agreed with aspects of traditional Christianity, he also rebelled against much of it, as well.

Norman Mailer has often been criticized for not focusing on “Jewish issues” in his writing. In fact, he has often been seen as being too critical of Jews altogether. His approach to his Jewish background is complicated, as might be expected with Mailer. In an interview in 1988, he says that his being Jewish is important to him, but that he won’t capitalize on it: “Two formative currents of personality came together to make my nature. . . . One of them is being Jewish. I’m not a Holocaust hustler, I’m not asking for pity, but every Jew alive feels his relationship to the world is somehow more tenuous than other people’s, and so to affirm his existence is somehow more important” (Begieling 317). However, some critics have seen him as rejecting, or at least ignoring, Jews in his writing: “Yet though he was born into a very Jewish community, and appeared sensitive to his Jewish origins while at Harvard, his work (with the exception of The Naked and the Dead, which exposes the anti-Semitic bigotry aimed at characters such as Roth and Goldstein) shows few explicit signs of a self-conscious Jewish sensibility at work. In an interview in 1963, he admitted that his ‘knowledge of Jewish culture is exceptionally spotty’ . . .” (Glenday 5).
Even this is not clear, though, as there is a Jewish tradition of individualism that Mailer may be drawing upon:

For Alfred Kazin, Mailer belongs rather to another Jewish tradition, that of radical individualism: “Jewishness Mailer disliked because it limited and intellectualized. . . . With his contempt for the knowledge-as-control, his desire to leave all those centuries of Jewish tradition (and of Jewish losers) behind him, Mailer represented the unresting effort and overreaching of the individual Jewish writer who seeks to be nothing but an individual (and if possible a hero). Mailer, then, perpetuates a line of Jewish individualism of which his rabbi grandfather would have approved, for he was the unofficial rabbi who ‘never wanted a congregation because he said the rabbis were schnorrers and he wouldn’t live that way.’” (Glenday 5)

Regardless, the struggle between good and evil, God and the Devil shows up in Mailer’s writing on a consistent basis. He views both sides as necessary, however. He writes,

The minority is not God or the Devil, Black or white, woman or man. Rather it is that element in each which has somehow been repressed or stifled by conformity to system—including systematic dialectical opposition—or by fear of some power, like death, which is altogether larger than the ostensible, necessarily more manageable opponent apparently assigned by history. The minority element in males or Blacks or God is the result of their inward sense of inferiority which the outward or visible opposition from women or whites or the Devil did not of itself necessarily create. (qtd. in Poirier 112)

Though both good and evil, God and the Devil are necessary, men and women can still sway the battle: “The war between God and the Devil figures in nearly everything Mailer has written, and in his theology a man’s efforts
can apparently help one side or the other” (Poirier 114). Regardless, balance will always be maintained: “without the Devil there could be no God in Mailer’s universe, only entropy. He is quite unable to imagine anything except in oppositions, unable even to imagine one side of the opposition without proposing that it has yet another opposition within itself” (Poirier 114). When Black Book magazine challenged authors to write a short story in only six words, in fact, Mailer’s dealt with the opposition and balance of God and the Devil: “Satan—Jehovah—fifteen rounds. A draw.”

What is most interesting about Mailer’s interest in the story of Jesus, though, is why he decided to write The Gospel According to the Son at all. His motives smack of pure arrogance. First, like Burgess, he believed that he could tell the story better than the gospel writers:

What happened is that I was not that familiar with the New Testament. And I read it a couple of years ago. And I was struck with the gap between the great and beautiful lines in the New Testament and the spaces between, which were written by committee. And I thought, there have to be at least a hundred writers in the world who can do a better job with the same story than the committees that wrote the synoptic Gospels. And I thought I’m one of those hundred writers, and I want to try it. (“The Gospel According to Mailer”)

Second, he believes that he can identify with Jesus:

And I thought this one [The Gospel According to the Son] was fine because I have a slight understanding of what it’s like to be half a man and half something else, something larger. Believe it if you will, but I mean this modestly. Every man has a different kind of life, and mine had a peculiar turn. It changed completely at twenty-five when The Naked and the Dead came out. Obviously, a celebrity is a long, long, long, long way from the celestial, but nonetheless it does mean that you have two personalities you live with all the time. (qtd. in Wood)
This type of arrogance should not surprise readers familiar with Mailer. However, a comparison of oneself to the Son of God seems a bit much, even for Norman Mailer.

Nino Ricci, like Anthony Burgess, was raised Roman Catholic. In fact, he was a devout child, though he gave up his faith at a rather early age:

I was quite devout at the age of 6 or 8, then certain things stopped making sense. In Grade 8, when I was of age to receive confirmation, which is the first time you are asked to make a decision about your faith, I found myself approaching that rite of passage with no overwhelming commitment. You do it at school, with your whole class, so I did it, but later I stopped going to confession. Faith, it seemed to me, shouldn’t be a tepid thing. In high school, I even joined an evangelical, fundamentalist group to see if it would feel more real. It didn’t. (Stoffman J15)

He did attempt to return to some sort of faith, though, as he got older. In an interview, he commented,

In my 20’s, . . . I went through a strong intellectual rejection of Christianity. I came to realize, however, that somewhere between formal Christianity and my complete dismissal there had to be a middle way. And while I didn’t believe the Gospels, I did believe that there was a kernel of truth in them, that there was probably a charismatic Jewish leader of some kind in the first century named Yeshua who left behind a body of teachings and that, over time, stories grew up about him—some of which had some basis in reality, many of which were myths. (Starnino G1)

It was this religious conflict that led Ricci to write Testament as a way of working out his feelings about Jesus. He tells Paul Gessell, “When I went to write this book I didn’t know what I felt about Christian teaching. I went through a strong Christian faith as a child and shed it over my years of
adolescence until I was a young adult and was more or less an atheist or at least an agnostic” (F1). Though he was “raised Roman Catholic, enthralled as a child by the merciful miracle-worker Jesus, as an adult he lost Christianity, but he could not shake Christ” (Wald-Hopkins EE-01). He did not end up becoming a Christian, as doing so would mean that he would have to recognize Jesus as divine, which Ricci does not, but writing the book did give him “a whole new respect for Jesus and his teachings.” In fact, he says that he became a “Jesus follower” by the end (Gessell F1).

Ricci also wanted to write the book because he believes it is a story worth hearing again and again. In an interview, he states, “We are at a moment of spiritual crisis. Jesus had something to say that’s valid in our times, a philosophy and a religion that’s at the heart of Western culture” (Stoffman J15). Comments like this one have caused critics to view Ricci as a “Catholic novelist in the tradition of Graham Greene, tormented by a sense of guilt and sin. Religion formed his imagination” (Stoffman), regardless of whether or not Ricci views himself that way.

Jose Saramago does not say much about religion because he does not believe much about religion. He is a staunch atheist and Communist—Richard Preto-Rodas reminds us that Saramago “has never concealed his Marxist ideology” (697)—views that have earned him outsider status in Portugal, a largely Roman Catholic country (Nash 17). In fact, when he published The Gospel According to Jesus Christ, his name was stricken from the list of nominations for the European Literature Prize because the novel offended Portuguese Catholics (Nash 17).

It seems, though, that many of his works have commented on Christianity, even if indirectly: “Christianity/Christian themes are present in almost all Saramago’s novels but not necessarily as the narrative’s center. For example, in Lavantado do Chão, the birth of a new, revolutionary generation represented by the character of Maria Adelaide is described through Christian symbolism and in Memorial do Convento, the hypocrisy of the false religiosity and the deeds of the Inquisition are under scrutiny” (Kaufman 449). As to why he wanted to write The Gospel According to Jesus

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3Reynolds Price argues that the gospel of Mark “has proved the most influential of human books” (38).
Saramago simply comments that he wanted to “fill the blank spaces between the various episodes of Jesus’s life” (McKendrick 31). In doing so, not surprisingly, he created a Jesus that offended many.

These five authors clearly bring their religious backgrounds to their novels in telling the gospel story. In doing so, they provide fresh perspectives on the characters and events of those stories, though they clearly stray from the gospel accounts in relation to their backgrounds.