

The Quest for the Historical Identity of Jesus

New Director Named At Research Center

New York—(RNS)—Questions about the identity of Jesus are as old as the New Testament in which Christ asked His disciples: "Who do men say that I am?"

But today the speculation about the humanity of Jesus involves His physical characteristics, including His color, and the role He would take in today's social crises were He again on earth.

Sheed and Ward have recently published a book, "The Black Messiah", by the Rev. Mr. Albert Cleage, a study of the religious roots of Black Power. The minister asserts that Jesus was a black man.

There is little novelty in linking the identity of Jesus to social concerns. Appeals for peace and justice cite Jesus as model. Some defenses of the "hippie" movement and student activism have used the literacy of Jesus and his "cleansing of the Temple" as justifications.

On the other side, presentations of a "meek and mild" Jesus have tended to repress minority groups or activists whether that repression is conscious or unconscious.

Mr. Cleage, militant clergyman of Detroit's Shrine of the Black Madonna (United Church of Christ), is not the first to depart from the tradition of a fair-skinned Jesus. Also in Detroit, St. Cecilia's Roman Catholic church has replaced a blond Jesus in a mural with a black one.

A prize-winning African art work chosen for a 1968 Lit-Lit Christmas card depicts a nativity scene with black people. (Lit-Lit is the

World Literacy and Literature Commission of the National Council of Churches.)

Christians in Africa have long been accustomed to black portrayals of Jesus Christ just as believers in Japan or Korea are used to seeing Jesus with Far Eastern features.

It is not surprising that a claim like Mr. Cleage's should be made at this time when there is a surge of interest among Negroes in racial background and culture. Further, the history of art shows that concepts of Jesus are conditioned by cultural and personal images.

Jesus has Italian features in 15th and 16th Century Italian art. The most commonly known representation among modern American whites is that by the late Warner Sallman. Jesus appears very Anglo-Saxon with auburn hair and light eyes.

Missionaries have frequently pointed out the importance of persons making personal identification with Jesus. They say an American-looking picture of Jesus can prove extremely unhelpful in evangelism. Similarly, insistence on an all-white Jesus may have negative implications in the present era of U.S. racial tension.

Father Avery Dulles, S.J., commenting on the relation of the historical Jesus to faith, has said: "The problem of Jesus . . . is inseparable from the problem of history itself. Does human history have a goal and a meaning, and are these to be found in the movement which begins with the man from Nazareth?"

If an affirmative answer is given to this question, the identity of Jesus must somehow be viewed as historically rooted but not culturally exclusive.

More than an identity through color or psychology is involved in Mr. Cleage's description of Jesus. It is based on an historical contention: that the Jews in First Century Palestine were black. The claim, which points to Old Testament accounts of the years ancient Jews lived in Egypt, remains to be proved or disproved by archaeologists and social scientists.

The assertion, nevertheless, brings into popular discussion a topic which has generally been confined to biblical scholars, theologians and seminary students. This topic is the identity of Jesus in human and theological terms.

During the 18th Century "Enlightenment" in Europe, a new approach to history developed. Past times were opened to "scientific" exploration just as biological, mechanical and social sciences were on the move.

There were attempts, for example, to look into the history of a nation, to discover its roots and reconstruct sequences of events. As common as such work is today, it was a significant departure from the ordinary several centuries ago.

This historical probing was eventually applied to the Bible and the Christian Church. Major initiators were Protestants but exploration into Christian traditions was not to continue as only a Protestant task. Taking changes produced by time into account, the scholarly

methods of Catholics and Protestants are today not distinctly separable.

Prior to the "Enlightenment," the identity of Jesus was, basically, considered in terms of doctrines, creeds and official Church positions, Catholic and Protestant. Great effort was put forth to express the identity found in doctrines.

The historical explorations about Jesus which began in the 18th Century clashed at times with doctrinal formulas but were not necessarily intended as denials of creeds. Scholars wished to discover data which would permit affirmations about the historical Jesus independent of confessional statements. The primary study material, of course, was the Bible.

A long series of biographies or "lives of Jesus" was compiled in the 19th Century and the undertaking came to be called "the quest of the historical Jesus." The phrase was supplied by the English title of a book, originally in German, written in 1906 by the late Dr. Albert Schweitzer.

Dr. Schweitzer prepared an enormous study of the foremost "lives of Jesus." He concluded that writing a biography of Jesus was not so simple as some people thought. He also said that many writers let their own cultural conditioning determine the kind of Jesus they came up with. Many "Jesuses" of the 19th Century, wrote Dr. Schweitzer, were verbally "painted in the colors of modern bourgeois respectability . . ."

One of the most important, and positive, results of the

process Dr. Schweitzer surveyed came in 1905 when Dr. Julius Wellhausen declared that anybody writing about Jesus had to realize that "Jesus was a Jew." That observation has been taken into account in almost all subsequent studies on the historical Jesus.

Perhaps the pinnacle of reaction against biographies of Jesus came with Dr. Rudolf Bultmann, the famed and controversial German theologian, who in the 1930's suggested that writing a life of Jesus was an impossibility.

He advised that the most which might be explored is the Church's faith confession that Jesus Christ is God's Messiah (Anointed One) since there is so little information about Jesus except what the Church itself produced. The implication is that the Church's belief may well have influenced memories of the historical Jesus.

The feasibility of a "quest of the historical Jesus" has again preoccupied many theologians — Catholic, Protestant and Jewish—in the past few decades. Since Jesus was by birth a Jew, Jewish scholars have actively participated in investigations of the historical identity of Jesus.

The motivation is to affirm the continuity of the Christian message from the historical Jesus into the Christian Church. To ignore the issue of the historical Jesus, these men think, is to leave the Church without a solid foundation.

As Father Dulles has pointed out, the context of the question is the meaning and goal of history. Attention to the historical Jesus is not just

a scholars' game. There are many views of Jesus within the New Testament, and, as Father Frederick E. Crowe, S.J., of Regis College, Wiltondale, Ontario, has written, no one can say, "Now we know all there is to know about him."

Every advance in knowledge of mankind, Father Crowe continued, is also a new opportunity for understanding Jesus Christ insofar as the historical Jesus was a man.

PAPAL AUDIENCE

Vatican City—(RNS)—President Albert-Bernard Bongo of the Republic of Gabon was received in audience here by Pope Paul VI.

Cambridge, Mass.—(RNS)—Father James J. McGinley, S.J., former president of Canisius College, Buffalo, has been appointed director of the Cambridge Center for Social Studies.

The Cambridge center, established here in 1966, is a non-profit research center, staffed mostly by Jesuit priests and funded by foundation grants and voluntary contributions.

In addition to straight sociological research, the center devotes special attention to social questions which have significant moral overtones and to areas in which government and religion both have an interest.

It is the only institution of

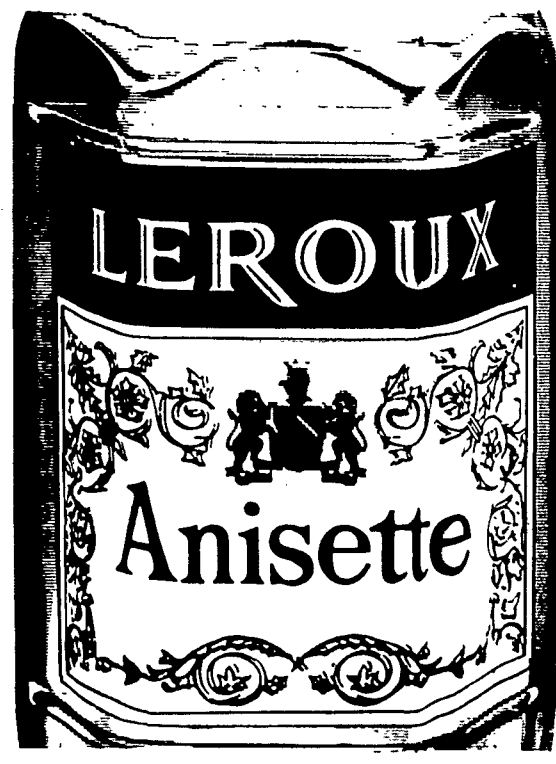
its kind in the United States but has counterparts maintained by the Jesuits in India, Chile, France, Africa and Hong Kong.

Staff members at the Center include:

— Father John L. Thomas, S.J., family sociologist, who is studying the relationship between religious beliefs and the rapidly changing values of sexuality and marriage.

— Fathers Avery Dulles, S.J., and William Scott, S.J., theologians who are investigating modern issues of apologetics and technology in relation to social problems.

— Father William Mehok, S.J., statistical specialist.



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Responsible Church Roles Urged for Laymen

Philadelphia—(NC)—The layman is capable and willing to take a responsible role in the Church, the executive director of the National Council of Catholic Men told participants in an archdiocesan pastoral study program here.

The basic problem for the Church, Martin H. Work said, is how it should function in a society which has set it free but has also cast it aside.

"The layman," Work said, "should be trained to carry Christian values to the secular community and to carry news from society to the Church. The layman must also share in the Church's decision-making process."

Work said that the modern layman must help to solve the following problems:

- Poverty: "How can one live as a Christian in a society

of abundance in which many do not share?"

- Inner city: "How do you relate the suburbs to the inner city?"

- Education: "How do we appeal to the young educated people under 25 who form 50% of our population?"

- Mobility: "Since our institutions are designed for permanence in an age when so

many people move, how do you shift emphasis from long-range planning and needs to short-range demands?"

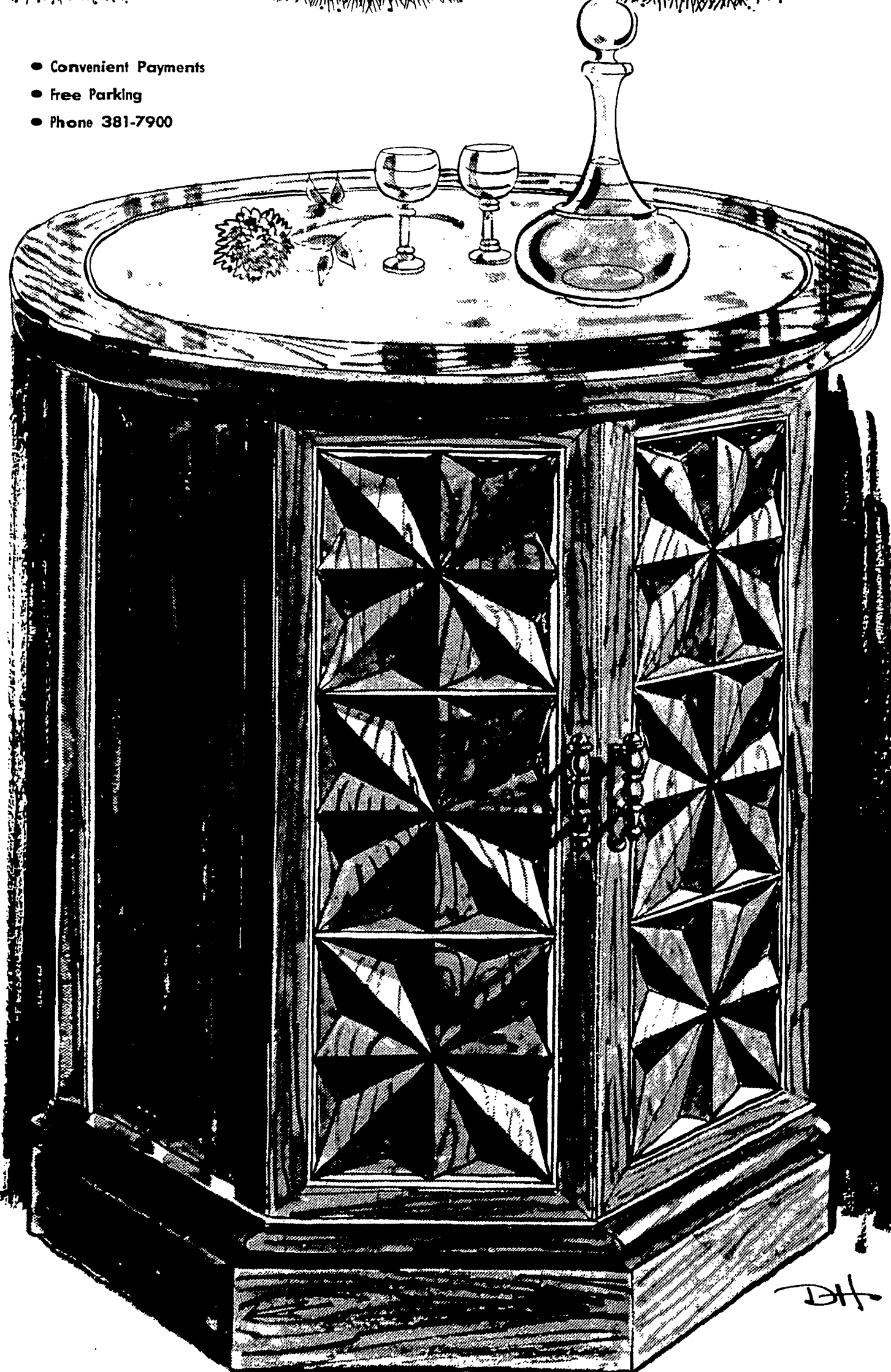
- Change: "How do you become pastorally relevant and yet remain faithful to truth?"

- Sexual revolution: "How do you speak of sexual love without embracing the secular idea that sex ought to have no restriction?"

- Charity: "Is Christian political power now the best way to help the deprived? Should we help to organize the poor politically to avoid destroying their sense of dignity through other forms of assistance?"

- Law and order: "Is disobedience to law among the deprived based on the injustice of those laws, or is it a reaction against laws in the formulation of which the poor did not participate?"

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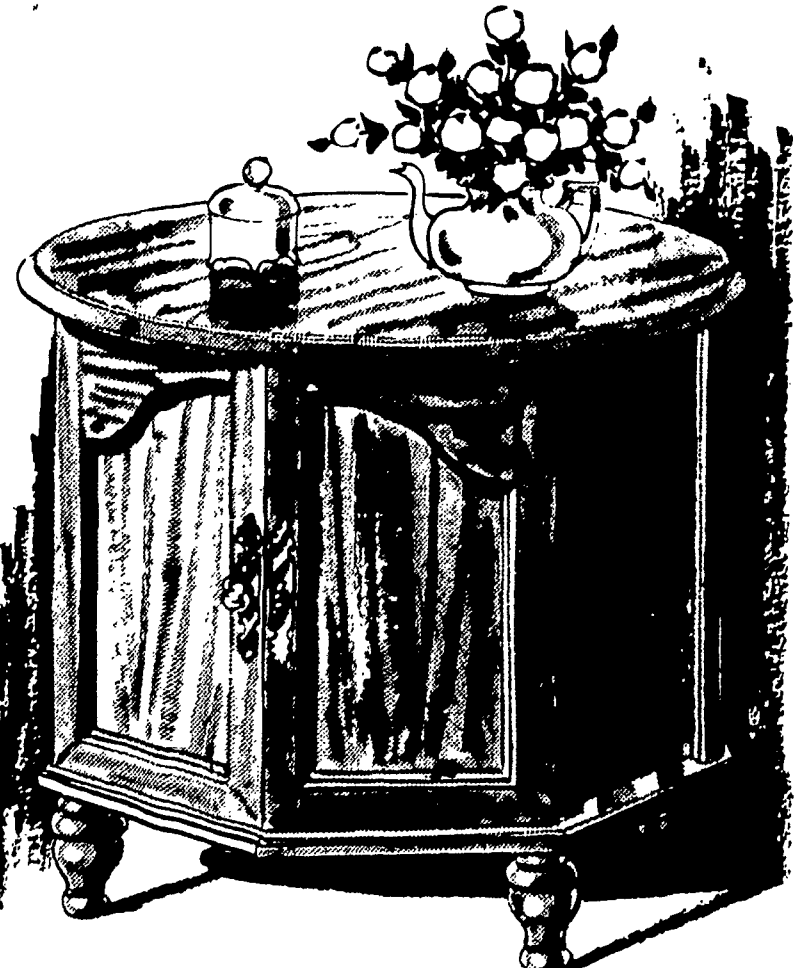
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