

## Palmed-Off Sunday

Andrew Newsham

*Extent: 3386*

Once a year, the leading representatives of planet Earth's various religions were invited to attend a short personal interview with the Supreme Being. Some called him God, others Allah, Yahweh or even Zeus, but to all of them he was the Boss. It was a time when he laid down the law and allowed each delegate a glimpse of the cosmic master plan in which they were involved. There was only one God, but lots of different brand names and sales territories. Nothing was sold as such but the earth was shaped by their ministrations. Humanity had to be educated somehow.

Jesus, the leading representative of Christianity and all Bible-based subdivisions, sat in the waiting room before his meeting with the Supreme Being and was ill at ease. He had been to 2003 such meetings and was utterly depressed by the whole scene. This year it was taking place in Binnion's Horseshoe Casino in Las Vegas. Last year it had been in a series of dark caves in the Hindu Kush. The year before he couldn't remember. The whole set up was the same: a waiting room, a door to the Supreme Being, the other reps mingling about nearby cracking jokes and making small talk.

Jesus had no time to talk shop with the others, as one of the big three religions he didn't feel he had much in common with the others anyway. He believed ardently in his own unique path. Sure, the others had similar troubles as he did with stupid followers and such but he thought that was because most of their gospels were obtuse and ridiculous.

They often ridiculed him. They said he had 'a Messiah complex'. It was all rather childish and immature. Jesus put it down to jealousy; their religions were moribund, their churches forgotten, their 'miracles' bizarre and unfathomable to the mind of modern man. His was the true light, the one path to salvation. Look at the figures, look at the number of followers, the number of active churches, the Bible was still a best seller even though they were giving it away free.

He especially disliked Habakkuk the Jewish representative. The man traded as an ex-rabbi these days, 'just call me Hershel' he said rubbing his hands together and smiling. He seemed so friendly until you got to know him. This was the guy who'd stood by in WWII while Hitler's 'Christians' fired up the death camps and told him, Jesus, in a heated dispute, that *he* lacked an eternal perspective.

The Jew came on like he was so much older and wiser than Jesus was and yet what was the Holocaust if not the Roman Persecution all over again? OK so his people had written the Bible but who had learnt what from whom?

Jesus still hadn't forgiven him. It didn't help that the guy was constantly making jokes about him. He had hours of material, whole routines built up over centuries. He'd seen them all on TV. All those Jewish comedians, they were 'inspired' all right - in the true sense of the word - but was it fitting for the immortal representative of a major religion to be a gag-writer? Jesus didn't think so.

This year Jesus had been made to pass through the whole casino to get to the waiting room and 'Hershel' had been around a Blackjack table with Pan and Satan. *Old Gods* - the man had no self respect. Jesus had tried to sneak by unnoticed but had still heard a jibe, some joke being wound up with the punch-line: "And the waitress said, 'he offered to save my soul but he wouldn't tip!'"

Those old gods could laugh. You could hear them miles away and yet they had the cheek to claim *he* was paranoid. At least it wasn't the one where he supposedly walked into a hotel and the manager gave him some nails.

It wore down his spiritual envelope, it made his palms itch.

What were they doing here anyway? Those old reps of defunct religions, they treated the meeting like a holiday and they all drank and smelt like goats, well maybe only Pan smelt like a goat but it carried everywhere. Anubus, the old Egyptian guy, didn't hang around the scene any more. He knew when his time was up and had disappeared with a little dignity but Pan and co were a menace. They'd formed the 'Pagan Collective' and went in to see the Supreme Being altogether. Their followers were basically the witchy set that didn't invoke Satan. A pitiful bunch of wasters and they numbered less than a few hundred worldwide. Not even enough to bother getting out of bed in the morning. No wonder they were so happy and care free, no wonder they could play cards. Jesus was run ragged, so many millions, so little time. How could he stop to play Blackjack and listen to the Jew's stories? It wasn't some little game. Mankind's future was at stake!

Jesus looked at the clock on the wall and sighed. He'd been waiting for almost half an hour. Incredible, as if he had time to hang around. The Buddha was in the office with the Supreme Being. He always went in behind Buddha and he always had to wait. His own meeting had begun to last, on average, between eight and ten minutes. Buddha was sometimes in there for over an hour. What did he do to deserve such special attention? All he did was laugh and take long naps in picturesque Japanese trees. Jesus couldn't fathom it but the Buddha always came out grinning. Not that it meant anything; the fucker was always grinning, as if the world was nothing more than a goofy cartoon. Jesus thought he was insane. He once caught him floating over the killing fields of Cambodia on a cloud of butterflies in a fit of hysterical laughter. Spooky.

Jesus was starting to have serious doubts about the boss, about everything, about the whole shitty system. Was he being puritanical? Damn right he was. He could see no problem in that. He was after all 'Gods own Son', with over 32% of the world's population allied to his light, singing his hymns, reading his gospel. Pan and co had lost all their followers years ago when mankind went beyond imagining goats as divine. He had supplanted them so why were they still here?

Jesus jumped to his feet and began to pace. What had he done to deserve such a snub year after year? It was almost as if the boss wanted him to be a failure. He never had a kind word for him. It could be because of all the Christian fanatics but that was only to be expected of a massive religion like his. You cast your net wide and you got a good catch but there's always going to be a lot of sub-normals in amongst the healthy fish. He was an awesome mover of minds, an electrifier of spirits, a force to enact the Supreme Being's cosmic plan but was he to be held accountable every time some nut case intoned his name and dhot someone in the head or hung someone from a tree? He'd understood that the mills of the lord were wide - but ground extremely fine. The big mill took in all kinds of misshapen wheat. As long it was all ground to his flour at the end of the process did it really matter? If the boss was that upset with the Christian Fundamentalists why didn't he just come out and tell him and he'd do something about it. He tried to keep the lunatic fringe from getting too out of control. It was spelled out clearly: 'THOU SHALT NOT KILL' but they were such a slippery bunch of bastards. They prayed and then they went out and dropped bombs and bought guns and drove cars into each other without batting an eyelid.

Jesus looked at the clock on the wall. The Buddha had been in with the Supreme Being for over half an hour. He could just Holy Ghost his way in there and check out what was going on but the Boss would spot him immediately.

Jesus sighed and sat down, 'calm calm calm,' he told himself. This was the trouble, he was so stressed that felt he wasn't functioning properly. There were so many evoking his name and miss-reading his scripture that it gave him a constant pounding headache. He knew Mohammed felt the same way.

Just last month there was a new group of followers who were calling themselves 'The Musical Truth'. They spread the good news and worshipped by performing biblically altered versions of popular musicals. They weren't a problem as such, just insane. The leader was a transvestite homosexual who liked dressing up as Mary Magdalene and 'going down' on the rest of the cast live on stage. It was incredible. Where in the Bible did it mention all-singing-and-dancing sex shows? Yet it was his problem, they were his followers, along with the fundamentalist group 'The Holy Light' who were planning to blow the next performance to pieces with 'Holy semtex'. It was madness, so mad in fact that he was beginning to doubt his own righteous path.

About a thousand years ago, Hershel had told him that doubt was normal when you realized the boss sanctioned other religions and that the doubts only grew with the number and variety of followers you had. They'd been on speaking terms then, the world had been a lot less populated, they bumped into each other often. Now he just took piss. Jesus put it down to jealousy and insecurity. Judaism was pretty big but it was on the down turn, if you looked at world population growth. Jesus looked at the figures constantly. Christianity was showing ominous trends but it would be impossible to tell really for another couple of decades.

The clock on the wall said Buddha had been in the office for over forty minutes! Jesus sighed and pulled out his cell phone and called up a powerful Baptist ministry in the Bible belt.

"Yes," he said when he was connected, "I want you to check the Buddhists for me - worldwide - I want the latest news, I want financial data and an estimate on their projected growth and current size and don't forget the Zens but don't count East Coast Vegetarians." He clicked the phone off and then made the call two more times to a statistical department in the Vatican and then to the Head of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The door from the outside corridor opened and The Twins entered in their customary black suits. The Twins represented Alien Based Religions. This was only the sixth or seventh meeting with the boss. They smiled at Jesus and sat down on the seats next to him. Jesus nodded his head at them in a way that implied utter serenity. He also upped his aura a few notches gradually so he started to glow.

Jesus despised The Twins. They were little more than cultists and they'd plagiarized all his best lines and given him no credit. If he didn't have a just reputation for mercy and forgiveness he'd have dropped a rock on them years ago. In fact he'd petitioned the Supreme Being to do just that on five occasions. It was tricky, they undermined his work and therefore the work of God but God's will was unfolding through the use of many religions so there was no way they could undermine the whole cosmic plan, just the Christian part of it. It was a catch 22.

Jesus was happy working with other religions. Up until now he'd been the hot new golden boy but if new religions came to supplant him then how long would it be before he was joining the Pagan Fellowship and watching Pan rape some drugged Sophomore in the graveyard of one of his abandoned churches? It was a long way off but the fact that it was a possibility was a stunning blow to the Holy Roller. It was a blow that would make the crucifixion and resurrection look like a cheap side-show stunt in a Las Vegas Hotel.

The door to the meeting room opened and the Buddha walked out smiling quietly to himself. He resembled a Chinese peasant. Jesus looked at the clock. He'd been in the room for over an hour. Jesus

stood up and bowed his head to the Buddha as he walked past. He giggled and walked out of the waiting room and into the hotel.

"The Buddha Consciousness," said the twins in unison to Jesus.

Jesus ignored them and walked into God's office. The door closed behind him.

The boss was sat behind a large desk and had taken human form as was traditional. The past forty or so years had been like this. He wore the robes of some kind of space aged monk with the hood up but where there should have been a face there was nothing but eternal night, a void so black it soaked up light from the room like a beam. In the early days when he had been more supportive of Jesus he had appeared like a wise old man with flowing white hair.

The others referred to it now, jokingly, as his 'white period'.

"Father," said Jesus.

"Jesus," said God.

There were no chairs in front of the desk. It was fine by Jesus; he didn't need to sit down.

"You've had a busy year," said the Supreme Being getting right down to business. "You still have followers worldwide, you still count as major force on the planet, your churches are rich and their members content and powerful. You are credited with more appearances and miracles than any other religious figurehead, in fact your personal fame and recognition on the planet is number two in all the poles, only fractionally behind that of Elvis."

Jesus laughed lightly, in what he considered to be a Zen like way. It was well known that the Supreme Being had a sense of humour. For years the Archbishop of Canterbury had been urging Jesus to develop his own lighter side. It was said that if you read certain passages of the Bible in a certain way that he sounded like Jackie Mason.

"Yet," continued the boss, "millions upon millions of your followers are petty and evil and intone your name only as camouflage for their own selfish interests. Your churches are emptying, the core message of The Bible is being misinterpreted, if and when it is read at all. The poor cling to it but they are getting screwed, quite literally in many Catholic Churches, by your priests."

"Well if you'd give me a little more room to maneuver, cook up a few huge miracles, then I'll be able to slam it to Satan and all these other religions you have running around undermining me all the time."

"Oh Jesus, that is so un-evolved," said the Supreme Being in a disapproving tone.

"Evolution - that's another problem to a lot of my people."

"But not to all of them, a lot of them combine your beliefs with evolution."

"So what are you saying," said Jesus, "you don't want them to believe you created them in seven days no more?"

"That whole seven days business is a bit silly, it was a bit more complex, evolution is a better way of understand the process. Humanity is moving on, it's ready for more information now."

Jesus was gob-smacked. Did this mean the end of his franchise? "I've always done your bidding," he stammered, "I think the core message is still good."

"Look, I've been telling everybody but it's you and Mohammed I'm primarily talking to here, I want you to cut back on all this bat-brained fundamentalism - it's really starting to fuck things up."

"But fundamentalism is just a symptom."

"I know, of a desperation to hold onto a world view that is no-longer tenable."

"Well only because of other religions and Satan."

"Satan nothing. I had him in here last night and he's in pieces, totally washed up. No-ones invoking him seriously anymore and you and Mohammed have followers committing more atrocities than he can keep up with. I've told him to take a year off in fact. He's going to relax and play around with the music scene. He likes that."

"So what are you saying," asked Jesus.

"I'm saying Christianity is no-longer tenable. The world has moved on. Humanity has evolved. You've been great, you've helped them. but a lot of your ideas are medieval."

Jesus felt weak and a large leather armchair suddenly appeared behind him. He sank down into it slowly, gladly.

"Don't take it so hard kid, you've done well, you've given a lot of people comfort, your work has allowed millions to live in relative peace and you've allowed Science to flourish which has upped the intelligence notch of the planet a few notches but."

"But that's it, so long."

"You must have seen it coming, look at the ancient religions, look at Pan."

"I try not to look at Pan," said Jesus, "I'd like not to be able to smell him too."

"It's not the end," said God. "Just cut back on the fundamentalists, ignorance is sin, make sure they know 'Thou Shalt Not Kill'. Keep things pure and simple from now on."

"So you want me to lose followers?"

"It's happening anyway if you'd stop massaging the figures for ten minutes you'd see."

Jesus turned red. You could never hide anything from the boss. "But what about Islam?" he asked.

"I've told Mohammed. The same goes for him, only I've given him more time. He has a bigger problem than you do, more followers living in poverty. It'll be a while before they get the options and education to break the cycle of ignorance. In fact I don't think he'll be able to help me much in the long run."

"You've told him that?" asked Jesus in surprise.

"Well not exactly. He knows that a lot of the basic tenets of his religion are at odds with modern life, they're not even compatible with space travel let alone some of the new stuff coming up." The Supreme Being leant towards Jesus. "Now don't tell him, I don't want him freaking out and turning Jewish or anything."

Jesus let out a reluctant smile. "So what do you want me to do?"

"Like I say, focus and simplify and you'll get by into the New Age. I want you to start visiting Buddha every so often, drop by his restaurant. He's been around four times as long as you and he can help."

"But he's still huge,"

"Yes, but only because he's not radical."

Jesus began to think about The Pope and all his other priests. What would he tell them? How would he commute his will? There was a new tone in the Supreme Beings voice, a new hardness. He knew he'd want results and see changes within a few years.

Jesus climbed to his feet. The meeting was over.

"And why don't you start talking to Hershel again, he likes you and he's worried," said God.

"Sure," said Jesus meekly. He walked out of the door, his feet felt like lead.

He didn't look at The Twins when he walked past them. If he had he'd have probably given them leprosy.

In a hotel room down the strip Jesus calculated that his meeting had lasted a pathetic eleven minutes. He drank four bottles of Scotch and then teleported himself to the edge of the pacific and began to walk slowly out on the water.

"I'll show them," said Jesus. He'd resolved to walk right across the ocean carrying a huge wooden cross. He'd be spotted sometime soon and he thought the repercussions would be unstoppable. Christianity would be around for another 2000 years at least.

He didn't know however, that a science lab in Australia had found a way of manipulating small force fields and in a couple of months people were walking on water everywhere. In fact, the Mediterranean Marathon was the highlight of the 2004 Olympics.