

A decorative oval frame with a double-line border. Inside, there are two stylized floral motifs on the left and right sides, each with five petals and a central circle. The frame encloses the text.

THE CHRIST

by

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Discussion Paper

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CHRISTIANS
AWAKENING to a
NEW
AWARENESS
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INTRODUCTION

It is in the light of our present world view that we are led to reconsider what we mean by 'the Christ', especially in relation to the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And of all the factors composing our world view that are causing Christians to rethink their notion of the Christ, I suggest that the predominant factor is our present understanding of evolution. Whether or not we accept the manner of its happening as proposed by Darwin - by the survival of the fittest - the fact of evolution of our species is now more than a hypothesis. It has caused our world view to change from the static to the dynamic; everything is continually in a process of change. Ideas, theories, doctrines, beliefs too are in constant process of change, no longer set in concrete for all eternity.

In respect of our particular subject this new world view has two implications. The first is that it challenges a traditional Christian belief that God intervened deliberately at some moment in history to create a human being, a being essentially distinct from any previous creature in that this creature had an eternal soul. Secondly, it challenges our belief that there was another direct intervention by God at a later point in history when the second person of the Trinity 'came down from heaven, by the power of the Holy Spirit, became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man' (to quote the Nicene Creed).

The man Jesus was a product of millions of years of evolution. While there was no need of his having a miraculous birth in the biological sense, the myth of such a miraculous birth states the truth that Jesus was a very special person. In what way

was he special? Whatever may have been the view of the Gospel writers, a contemporary way of answering this question is to say that Jesus can be recognised as the first fully mature man in our western culture: a 'new man' in whom the highest form of consciousness - Christ consciousness - has broken through.

In our present evolving world view the Jesus event can no longer be understood as causing a new creation, putting right a first creation that an original pair of human beings damaged, but rather as a new event in a continuing creation process of which we are the most recent products. Even St Paul, knowing nothing about evolution, acknowledged our incompleteness and our journeying towards a final destiny (Romans 8:22-23).

That Jesus of Nazareth was an historical person living in Palestine at the beginning of our Common Era - AD as Christians designate it - is widely accepted by historians as well as Scripture scholars. It is about his being entitled the Christ and the relationship of the Christ to the Godhead that has caused theologians from the earliest years of the Church to debate, theorise and hold Councils. The relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of eternity continues to present a mystery upon which I shall try to throw some light. (By 'mystery' I mean that Truth which in its totality we are unable to comprehend. We can only enter it piecemeal and appreciate it partially.)

THE NAME

Our translations into English of St Paul's letters, originally written in Greek, have their author write of 'Jesus Christ' as if a first name and a surname. And preachers and writers have used this appellation down to this day. It is fundamental to our re-thinking this mystery, that we recognise that 'Jesus' is the name of a human being born in history, while 'Christ' is a title given to that man. Etymologically, the word *Christ*, from the Greek, means the *anointed one* and as such has come to be a synonym for the Hebrew *Messiah* and thus to be applied to Jesus as Saviour. (We will consider the implications of this later.) In my own preaching and writing, as here, I always refer to 'Jesus the Christ'.

At this point I will lay my cards on the table and offer my own understanding of that term 'the Christ'. If the reader finds it helpful, then welcome to it: if it produces a sense of unease, then pass on! It is a mystery that many people wrestle with before they arrive at a definition with which they feel comfortable.

I understand the word *Christ* to have a much broader meaning: to be the manifestation of the Divine in creation. What we are considering here in particular is its manifestation in human form. The Christ-life is the life of God lived as a human person. St Paul wrote: 'The Christ is the visible image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1:15) and elsewhere he speaks of 'the glory of the Christ who is the exact likeness of God' (2 Corinthians 4:4). Dom Bede Griffiths referred to the Christ as 'the icon of God'.

So the Christian cannot claim that the Christ is only Jesus. The Christ is more than Jesus, indeed more than a human person, however Divine that person is conceived to be. Consequently to say that Jesus is the Christ is not the same as to say the Christ is solely Jesus. In other words, Jesus is the Christ, but the Christ is the Divine however and wherever the Divine is made manifest.

THE ETERNAL CHRIST

The Christ is God in creation: the creative Word, the Logos. So John's gospel begins:

‘Before the world was created, the Word already existed; the Word was with God and the Word was God. From the very beginning the Word was with God. Through the Word God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without Him. The Word was the source of life, and this life brought light to all humanity’ (John 1:1-4).

This is more succinctly put by St Paul: ‘Christ existed before all things and in union with Him all things have their proper place’ (Colossians 1:17). The Word, the Christ, is God in the role of continuing creator, holding all things in being.

During the blessing of the Paschal Candle, the Easter Liturgy pronounces: ‘Christ yesterday and today, the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega; all time belongs to him, and all the ages; to him be glory and power, through every age and forever’. This is a way of saying the Christ is beyond time and space since both are a feature of our created Universe. ‘Christ is all, Christ is in all’ (Colossians 3:11).

Christ is not only the Alpha (the beginning) but also the Omega (the end) (Ephesians 1:10). Raimundo Panikkar writes in *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* *:

‘This then is the Christ: that reality through whom everything has come, in whom everything subsists, to whom everything that suffers the wear and tear of time shall return. He is the embodiment of Divine Grace that leads everyone to God; there is no other way but through Him (John 14:6)’.

THE COSMIC CHRIST

To speak of the Christ is always to speak of the Cosmic Christ. By the Cosmic Christ we refer to the Divine energy, perpetually creating and sustaining the Universe: the universal energy of love.

The Jesuit palaeontologist and mystic of the last century, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, with his evolutionary vision of the world, presents the Christ as the physical centre of the world, of evolution, and gives three quotations from St Paul to support his view:

Romans 8:19-23 (the whole creation is groaning until now in an agony of birth)

Colossians 1:15-20 (the pre-existence of the Christ 'born before every creation')

Ephesians 1:9-10, 22-23 (God's design from the beginning centred in the Christ).**

THE CHRIST IN RELATION TO HUMANITY

For us human beings the Christ can never be totally known on Earth because to see Christ would amount to 'seeing the Father' (John 14:9), to comprehending the Godhead. . . As human beings we can only think of God in human terms. We can do no other. This limited human perception of the Christ I shall call 'the Christ myth'. (A myth is not a non-reality, but rather the expression, through image or story, of a truth which is beyond our total comprehension, beyond verbal description.)

For us as human beings the highest expression of the Christ myth is in human form. It expresses the archetypal image of the fully mature human being: the person as God-like as it is possible for a human being to become. That ideal person who, in our deepest selves, we all aspire to become. So there are many manifestations of the Christ myth. Indeed, every one of us, whether recognising it or not, is to a greater or lesser extent, at different times, no doubt, an image, a reflection of the Christ: embodiment of the Christ. This recognition came to St Paul: 'It is no longer I who live but it is the Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20) and elsewhere he writes: 'The secret is that Christ is in you, which means that you will share in the glory of God' (Colossians 1:27). There are not many Christs but only the one Christ and many manifestations of that one Christ.

JESUS THE CHRIST

The manifestation of the Christ with which Christians are most familiar is in the human person of Jesus of Nazareth. We think of him as the most complete, the most God-like, most God-filled human being. While the Christ pre-existed the Universe, Jesus of Nazareth did not. He 'dwelt among us' in one short period of human history. While Jesus lived in Palestine - supposedly for some thirty years - there was not an absence of the Christ within the Godhead during that period!. The pre-existent Christ is in the Godhead eternally, without interruption. What we name the Son, the second Person of the Trinity.

Christian tradition speaks of Jesus' coming as the 'Incarnation', meaning that the person of Jesus pre-existed time. In an evolutionary perspective, the very first human beings - those primates which evolved into creatures with which we can identify - were the first creatures to develop a self-reflective consciousness, and consequently the first to have the potential to recognise the Divine in nature. In this sense we can say they were the first Incarnation of the Christ. The Jesus event, a million or more years later, was the achievement of humanity reaching its incarnational maturity. (The feast of Christmas is the celebration of this achievement.) Jesus was not a being different in kind from us, launched into our world from some heavenly abode, but a product like us of the evolutionary process, which is why I speak of the Jesus event as a human achievement. And yet, 2000 years later, the rest of us are still striving to evolve to the heights of the Christ myth.

However, the person of Jesus is more than a model of what we might become. In Christian terminology, as we have already said, 'Christ' means the anointed one, the specially chosen of God, and called Messiah, Saviour. Jesus, by his being the very

fulfilment of the archetypal human being, breaks through the barriers of human limitation and thereby empowers us to follow in the same 'Way'. He was so completely for others, living entirely for the Divine Other, that the Christ within him was released to full capacity. The powers he is reported to have exercised - physical healing, spiritual healing, power over nature and material things - he was able to do, not because he was God, but because he was a fully evolved human being 'reaching to the very height of the Christ's full stature' (Ephesians 4:13), as Luke says: 'The power of the Spirit was with him' (4:14). He is the New Adam, in that he is the first to break through to a new level of consciousness, into the next evolutionary step for humanity. Jesus promised us 'Whoever believes in me will do what I do - yes, he will do even greater things' (John 14:12). The Kingdom message of Jesus - the very kernel of his teaching - supposes that humanity is, through him, evolving into a new consciousness, a fuller life. 'I have come in order that they might have life - life in all its fullness', said Jesus (John 10:10). The Christ, acting in the world as creative energy, initiates our evolution as creatures of the Spirit. 'If Christ lives in you, the Spirit is life for you' * (Romans 8:10). The Spirit is always the Spirit of Christ (I Peter 1:11).

What we call the resurrection of Jesus is the symbol of the newly constituted human creature: that state which humanity will evolve into. Just as at our death we shed our human body as being no longer required, so after his death Jesus no longer required his human body, except in a form by which to make known to his disciples that he still lived, though in a higher form of life. Thus his resurrected 'body' had different properties from our physical bodies.

A literal belief in the resurrection appearances tells us nothing about 'life after death'. Jesus told us nothing about the nature

of his post-resurrection life, nor do we know what became of the human Jesus after he was seen for the last time. If at some future date archeologists found the remains of a body in a Jerusalem tomb that could be identified as that of Jesus of Nazareth, it would not make the slightest difference to belief in Jesus as the Christ.

A BRIEF HISTORY

In a short paper it is not possible to trace the development of the Christ myth through the 2000 years of Hebrew history, but Jesus was a child of this myth and it was in its light that the Apostles interpreted who Jesus was and so gave meaning to his death and resurrection.

Jesus was born into a religion and culture fully expecting the appearance of a Messiah. Although understanding themselves as a 'Chosen People', the children of Israel had had their nation divided, banished into exile and now occupied by a foreign and pagan empire. Living in fear of a permanent loss of identity, the Jews of Jesus' time longed for a king and a kingdom which reflected the glorious days of King David. These were the expectations and longings amidst which the young Jesus grew up. Just as with every human being, Jesus' knowledge of God and God's intentions could only come from his own experience and that of other people. He would have been well grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures, familiar with his people's stories, myths, poetry and prophecies. Did Jesus actually think of himself as the expected Messiah? Certainly he did not identify with the myth of a son of David restoring an earthly kingdom to Israel. Yet when Nathanael greets him with: 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel' (John 1:49) Jesus does not deny this exalted epithet. He understood that his mission centred around proclaiming the 'Kingdom of God' which was both an inner experience (John 3:3) and a sociological vision: the world as God meant it to be. He spoke as 'one having authority' (Matthew 7:28) because he lived by the Kingdom values which he preached.

What began as a Messiah myth embodying the expectations of a saviour of the Jewish people as a nation, evolved into a

Christ myth proclaiming a universal saviour for all humanity, identified as Jesus of Nazareth.

Since the earliest days of the Church - as soon as it spread into the Greek world - the Good News of the Gospel began to be expressed in terms of Greek culture. Philosophical controversies arose. For the first six centuries of Christian history there was endless debate over whether Jesus was fully human but had become divine or fully God but took on a human nature, or whether he was a person of two equal natures, human and divine at the same time. Docetism underplayed the humanity; Arianism did not do justice to his divinity. What was the nature of this union? How could two natures be integrated in the one person? To make the distinction between a divine nature and a human nature in Jesus is to create a dualism that implies that it is beyond our own capacity with our human nature and its insufficiently focused consciousness, to be open to the realisation of the Divine within us as Jesus was.

JESUS' RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

From John's account of Jesus sharing his deepest self with his closest friends at the Last Supper it is clear that he experienced a very close intimacy - what today we would call 'unity consciousness' - with God.

Every person has the presence of the Divine within them. As the Quakers say: 'There is that of God in all men'. What distinguishes us from each other is our level of awareness of this presence and consequently the degree of our ability to draw on the potential divine energy. All of us are sons or daughters of God. The Christ within Jesus is the same Christ within us.

'Your real life is Christ' wrote Paul to the Christians in Colossae (3:4). The difference is one of degree, not of kind.* In raising humanity to a new level of awareness of our human-God relationship, Jesus as the Christ would have us dispense with religion's intermediaries and communicate with God directly. 'In union with the Christ and through our faith in Him we have the boldness to go into God's presence with all confidence' (Ephesians 3:13). That presence is within us. The God who dwells deep within us is much more magnificent than the distant Sky God of religious myth. We worship the God to which the Christ myth points, whom we see reflected in the man Jesus. We do not worship the historical Jesus in himself.

In the Eucharist we celebrate one of the modes of the presence of the Christ, under the forms of bread and wine, without identifying it with the historical, biological body and blood of the human Jesus. In administering Holy Communion we proclaim: 'The Body of Christ'. We are acknowledging that we form 'the body of Christ' (Ephesians 1:23), and are called 'to build up the body of Christ' (Ephesians 4:12).

FUTURE HOPE

While we Christians claim to be followers of Jesus as the Christ, because for us he is the most perfect expression of what we aspire to become, we have to recognise that the Christ myth has its counterpart in other Faiths, as the ideal to which humanity aspires, whether in the form of 'the way' of Lao-tzu in Taoism or the Bodhisattva (the saviour figure in Buddhism) or the Quetzalcoatl myth of the Aztecs.

When the Apostles said (Acts 4:12): 'There is no other name by which we can be saved' they were not ruling out the possibility of other saviours, but proclaiming that it was not they but their risen Lord - the eternal Christ - who was working such wonders.

If with this understanding of the Christ in our present world view we are able to make a distinction between the historical Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ of eternity, might this not be a basis of dialogue between the great world religions? Islam holds Jesus in high regard, not as divine, but as a prophet. Enter the home of a Hindu and you are likely to find in their shrine a picture of Jesus alongside Kali, Vishnu and Shiva. Jesus for them is one of many expressions of the manifold qualities of the Divine.

What our world needs to move towards is a shared understanding of what it means to manifest the Divine life. For this purpose, the concept of the cosmic or universal Christ - though without using that term - is fundamental.

QUESTIONS FOR PONDERING OR DISCUSSION

1. How far and in what way do the ideas expressed in this paper differ from your own thinking about Jesus the Christ? Do you find that disturbing? If so, why?
2. Who is the Jesus you pray to - if you do?
3. 'Your real life is Christ' Paul wrote to the Colossians (3:4). He would write the same to us. What does that mean to you?
4. Do you see any indications that over the past 2000 years humanity is gradually evolving towards the Christ myth, towards becoming the archetypal image of fully-realised humanity?
5. What persons do you know of, in the past or present, who shone for you as 'another Christ'? What was it about them?

RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER READING

Fox, Matthew. *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*; Harper & Row. 1988.

The book is divided into five parts. Part 3 is entitled: *From the Quest for the Historical Jesus to the Quest for the Cosmic Christ* and Part 4 is entitled *Who is the Cosmic Christ?* The book is full of thought-provoking sentences. For example: “The Cosmic Christ still needs to be born in all of us - no individual, race, religion, culture or time is excluded. ‘Christ’ is a generic name. In that sense we are all ‘other Christs’”.

Crossan, John Dominic. *Who is Jesus?* HarperCollins 1996

This paperback was published to answer the many questions that this Biblical Scholar was asked following his best-selling *The Historical Jesus*. So the matter is presented in question and answer form. In a straight forward way Crossan addresses every subject from Jesus’ conception to the miracles, his baptism, his resurrection and more.

Funk, Robert W. *Honest to Jesus*; Harper Collins. 1996

This Biblical Scholar, founder of the Jesus Seminar for discerning the authentic words and actions of Jesus, proposes “a Jesus for a New Millennium”. He takes the reader through the Gospels and ancient history to find Jesus the subversive, social critic and dissident but also Jesus the sage. Funk proposes a revitalised Christianity, shaped by history, not orthodoxy.

Yungblut, John R. *Rediscovering the Christ*. Element Books. 1991

The author, a graduate of Harvard College and Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, USA, takes a radical approach to making Jesus come alive again for those who can no longer reconcile the traditional doctrines about Jesus as the Christ with their present world view.

Panikkar, Raimundo. *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*; Darton, Longman & Todd. London. 1981.

As Thomas Aquinas incorporated Aristotle's philosophical method into Christianity, so Panikkar integrates Indian wisdom and Christianity. The author stresses that it is possible to find Christ in any of the authentic religious traditions. Here, his concern is with Hindu wisdom. Born in Barcelona in 1918 Panikkar is the son of a Hindu father and a Spanish Catholic mother and holds doctorates in three different disciplines.

