

Oneing

AN ALTERNATIVE ORTHODOXY

INTRODUCTION

Grace had already been granted to us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, and now it has been revealed to us in the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus.

—2 Timothy 1:10

MOST OF US were given the impression that Christ was Jesus' last name. We were presented with "the historical Jesus" (largely in the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke), not fully realizing we had already been presented with a *ubiquitous Christ* in Paul's letters (which preceded all the Gospels) and a rather *archetypal and larger-than-life Christ* in the later Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation.

Because we read about Jesus and Christ together in the New Testament, we failed to notice that they were almost—although not entirely—two very different figures. We lumped them together as one and the same and, in my opinion, lost much of *the dialectical message that is maintained by also distinguishing them*—as Paul and John did for some surely important reasons.

I am not denying that both Paul and John had also conjoined them as one and the same. We cannot really *unite* two things until we have first somehow *differentiated* them. This new unity is the synthesis

and the message! We cannot, with full effect, say “I believe in Jesus Christ” until we have met both Jesus and Christ, on different levels, and recognized that we actually made two distinct faith affirmations. I promise this will clarify many things.

This is what happened right after Pentecost, when Peter excitedly recognized that *Jesus was the Christ* (see Acts 2:36). This conviction of Jesus as the Christ (Christ = Anointed = “Messiah”) surely preceded any proclamation of Jesus as “Son of God,” which would have been received with much greater difficulty by Jewish monotheists.

By the time most of us came along, centuries later, the two very different images of Christ and Jesus had been conflated for so long in the Christian imagination that we failed to notice that Paul hardly ever talks about the historical Jesus (or quotes him accurately or directly), while the enigmatic, larger-than-life figure in John’s Gospel and the Book of Revelation hardly ever speaks in the simple style of Jesus of Nazareth. Note that the narratives and stories in John’s Gospel are, for the most part, unique to John and not found in the three Synoptic Gospels. John is allowing the eternal Christ to speak, whereas the other Gospels largely have Jesus speaking (again, do not make the dichotomy too absolute). However, this clarification will resolve many of our pastoral and practical questions and clarify many problematic texts. For example, John 14:6—“I am the way, the truth, and the life”—which is exclusionary and competitive in the mouth of Jesus, is a needed, universal truth in the mouth of the Christ.

Jesus, for John, has become the universal Greek *Logos*, the divine principle of *Spirit acting as matter*—not a mere human person so much as a high-level statement about the shape of Reality. More importantly, John is indicating how this Reality works in our favor. The Christ reveals matter and Spirit, operating as one and everywhere, and might even be seen as universal religion. *Whenever we experience such an awesome manifestation, we experience the Christ.* “In the beginning was the Logos” (John 1:1), which resolves the question of what happened to people before the Incarnation of Jesus.

Note that John’s Gospel has no account of the birth of Jesus and seemingly no interest in it. He starts much earlier, with the Christ—and let’s be honest: The Christ in John’s Gospel mostly talks about himself! This would be very problematic if it were Jesus—as it has been for many people—but makes full sense if this is the universal, divine pattern speaking.

The Christ of Paul's letters is a cosmic, but deeply personal, energy field, available to all—Jews, Gentiles, and pagans—as indicated by his constant usage (164 times!) of the telling phrase, “in Christ” (“*en Cristo*”), which is a corporate and shareable notion of God rather than an individual Jesus-person. John's Gospel is also speaking in a completely higher octave, with his Christ walking around making massive theological proclamations that we never find in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Further, in the Book of Revelation, Christ has become a symbolic warrior, riding a white horse, with a sword coming from his mouth (Revelation 19:11, 15) and a harvesting sickle in his hand (14:14). This is anything but the non-violent, “meek and humble of heart” Jesus (Matthew 11:29) teaching his Sermon on the Mount. How can such total opposites both be true? How do we possibly put them together? In this case, most of history has not succeeded very well—creating huge social problems.

We can't put them together logically and, unfortunately the disturbing, wrathful Christ has won out in the imagination, and even the songs, of many Christians, to this day. Is it any surprise that the great marching song of the American Civil War, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which was sung with equal enthusiasm to justify violence on both sides, has this as its opening verse?

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are
stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.¹

This is no longer the “truth” or the religion of Jesus of Nazareth, in any sense, yet it is based on chapters 14 and 19 of the Book of Revelation. It can only be understood archetypally, as the certain *karma of good and evil* (“what goes around comes around”), but not as any of Jesus' possible attitudes or policies.

Jesus, by himself, does not have so many levels and seeming contradictions, and thus he is much easier to understand and to imitate than Christ. That is why Jesus is so necessary and important as a complement to Christ. He is like the grounding wire that holds this huge force field of Christ onto the earth, into concrete and personal

experience, and into a consistent, moral worldview. Without Jesus, we have succeeded in making the Christian message violent, exclusionary, segregationist, imperial, and punitive. If Jesus is allowed to be the touchstone of all orthodoxy, none of this works!² Jesus commanded us to love our enemies and forgive “seventy times seven times” (Matthew 18:22), while “Christ” was used to validate eternal unforgiveness and punishment by this same divine figure. Who has the true message? In every case, trust Jesus, who punished no one. If we don’t, we will get into major trouble with understanding the whole message.

Very few people find much reason to dislike or push back against Jesus of Nazareth, whereas the Christ seems to be making such universal claims and absolute assertions—often feeding later violence—that the modern and post-modern minds find him to be exclusionary, proud, competitive, and often just unlikeable. Christ has been misused a great deal, because archetypes and collective symbols are highly malleable. The ego does the same to serve its own purposes (slavery, apartheid, segregation, and prejudices of all stripes that have no foundation in Jesus, but always come from uncritiqued culture and human ego).

My question, is simply this: How do we understand and respond to these two different “Christs” in a way that is honest to the text, truly helpful to the soul and to society, and also truly honest and helpful toward what might be the divine intention?

This is my take on the situation:

Christ grounds and proclaims a totally universal message (a “natural law”) in very ordinary life themes, even the natural law of karma, which we interpreted as divine reward and punishment. Spiritual teachers, like Jesus, are usually saying goodness will be its own reward and evil will be its own punishment, but humans tend to read spiritual texts in terms of direct causality from God. I put it this way: We are punished by our sins rather than for our sins!

Christ, as such, is not precisely a religious principle, and certainly does not validate any organized or systematic religion. Christ is a life principle—the ubiquitous confluence of matter and spirit. Whenever we let such a wonderful recognition affect us, we have just met the Christ (and we don’t need to call it Christ for it to be the true experience of Christ)!

What look like overstated, tribal, punitive, and apologetic truth claims (unprovable and argumentative) when put into the mouth of Jesus, become rather inviting metaphors when they are allowed to be

statements about the *mystery of Incarnation*—which is everywhere visible and equally available to all since the very beginnings of consciousness. (It doesn't seem possible that God would only have started speaking two thousand years ago, leaving thirteen billion eons empty of the Divine.)

The Christ Mystery is indeed “the way, the truth, and the life,” but this is not about a religion or group one can join (which is how we have heard it), but rather a mystery of Incarnation that can be experienced by all, and in a million different ways. If Christ is the life principle, I would then say that Jesus is the inclusion of death into any honest notions of life. Yes, Jesus is the death principle, if you will allow me to say it that way.

Christ is our word for the universal principle of truth and the process of growth (death and resurrection), just like *Logos* or *Tao*. Christ is good and even necessary for one coherent history and society. “In him [sic] everything in heaven and on earth was created, things visible and invisible” (Colossians 1:16) (although Christ is not a “him” at all, but beyond all gender [Galatians 4:28], which solves many of our useless gender arguments about the Incarnation).

Jesus grounds and proclaims what will usually become an abstract theory and universal theology into something (Someone) that is concrete, verifiable, visible in some sense, imitable, and personally loveable.

If some notion of the Christ is good and necessary for a coherent society, Jesus is good and necessary for the individual soul. We need them both. This is the dialectic between Christ and Jesus.

If Christ is the kite, Jesus is the little boy flying the kite and keeping it from escaping away into invisibility. He does own the Christ identity (Matthew 16:16–20).

If Jesus is the little boy holding the kite string, Christ is the great banner in the sky, from whom all can draw life—even if they do not recognize the boy.

Jesus does not hold the kite to himself as much as he flies it aloft, for all to see and enjoy.

Christ is necessary if Jesus is to be the Savior of the whole Universe and we are to have a universal message.

Jesus is necessary if Christ is to embrace the individual heart and soul.

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NOTES

- 1 Julia Ward Howe, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1862.
- 2 John Dominic Crossan, *How to Read the Bible and Still be a Christian* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015).