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AN ALTERNATIVE ORTHODOXY

Further Reflections on the Cosmic or Universal Christ

By Matthew Fox

I WROTE MY BOOK *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* thirty years ago, and the response over the years has been striking. Many people have told me that the book kept them in the church and both deconstructed and reconstructed their Christian faith. Fr. Thomas Berry (1914–2009), a true eco-prophet of our time, called the book “a classic,” and his teaching that ecology is “functional cosmology” demonstrates the profound connection between the Cosmic or Universal Christ and the way out of the ecological apocalypse that stares us in the face at this time.

More recently, I co-authored a book with Episcopal Bishop Marc Andrus called *Stations of the Cosmic Christ*. This book, along with its set of meditation cards, is an attempt to create a *practice* of the Cosmic

Christ that incarnates the theology more bodily and more immediately into our consciousness. It also offers a balance to the traditional practice of Stations of the Cross which, while powerful and useful over the past thousand years or so, is very narrow in its scope, concentrating as it does on the last twenty hours of Jesus' life—which were indeed very lugubrious. Yet he taught and lived so much more than those last hours, lived in the hands of the Roman Empire! Why did he get in such trouble in the first place?

For one thing, he got in trouble for teaching about compassion and, therefore, the Cosmic or Universal Christ. Our Stations name sixteen instances in the teachings and stories (including liturgical feast days) of Jesus that are *all* set in the context of the Cosmic or Universal Christ. I am pleased that Richard Rohr, among others, understands the revolutionary nature of the revelation and rediscovery of the Cosmic Christ. He wrote this about the *Stations* book:

What a brilliant and exciting combination of creative words and evocative images. And where they take us is where we must go! We need a Christ at least as large as the universe we inhabit and much larger than the tribal religion most of us were born into. Allow yourself to be happily led there.¹

These sixteen stations are named by artists M. C. Richards and Ullrich Javier Garcia Lemus, who created clay tablets depicting the seven "I am" sayings in the Gospels (M. C. Richards) and nine other events recorded in the life of Jesus (Javier Lemus). These sculptures form the heart of the book and are accompanied by Bishop Andrus' and my meditations. The sixteen stations are as follows:

1. "In the beginning was the... Word... Fireball... Void..." (John 1:1)
2. "I Am the Light of the World" (John 8:12)
3. Nativity
4. Baptism
5. "I Am the Living Bread" (John 6:51)
6. The Transfiguration
7. "I Am the Vine" (John 15:5)
8. "Do It to the Least and You Do It to Me" (Matthew 25:40)
9. "I Am the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11)
10. "I Am the Door" (the Gate, the Way) (John 10:9)

11. "I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6)
12. Crucifixion
13. Resurrection
14. "I Am the Resurrection and the Life" (John 11:25)
15. Ascension
16. Pentecost

Following are some lessons I have learned since publishing these two books on the Cosmic or Universal Christ.

While many people imagine that the Cosmic Christ was a twentieth-century perspective, dating back to Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) in 1916, or even that it is a New Age concept, nothing could be further from the truth. The truth is this: The Cosmic Christ is *found in the earliest writings of the Christian tradition, namely the letters of Paul and the Gospel of Thomas.*

This fact cannot be emphasized enough, for, if this is true—and it is—and if the Cosmic Christ perspective sounds “all new” to us, it means that, to the extent that we have been ignorant of the Cosmic Christ, we who call ourselves Christian, followers of Jesus, have been on a detour from our roots for centuries. We have set ourselves up for the damaging psychologizing of religion, the anthropocentrizing of religion, what Pope Francis accurately calls the “narcissism” that feeds too much of religion and society in general.

To demonstrate the Biblical basis for the understanding and revelation of the Cosmic Christ, consider these teachings from Paul: “In him all things hold together” (see Colossians 1:15–20); Philippians 2:6–11; Romans 8:14–39. Consider also these other teachings found in the New Testament: Ephesians 1:13–14; Hebrews 1:1–4; John 1:1–18; Revelation 1:5–7, 10–20; 4:9–11; 5:9–14; 21:1, 3–6.² Read the Gospel of Thomas for glimpses of the Cosmic Christ; for example: “Lift up the rocks and I am there; split the wood and I am there” (77b). The Gospel of Thomas, like the letters of Paul, is earlier than the Gospels.

The Cosmic Christ will never be fully explained. It is not a product of dogma or doctrine; rather, it is *an experience.*

Gospel stories that provide the themes for *all the great feast days in Christianity*—Christmas, the Transfiguration (In the Eastern Church, this is the greatest feast day of the year!), Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost—are all set in a cosmic context. Check out the Biblical readings for these feast-day liturgies with the perspective of the Cosmic Christ in mind and you will see that the setting is utterly cosmic for each of these great occasions. The gospel passages for these events are listed on pages 201 and following of *Stations of the Cosmic Christ*.

Scholars today agree that the historical Jesus comes from the Wisdom tradition of Israel. The Wisdom tradition is deeply *cosmic*. It cares about the cosmos and is deeply ecumenical or interfaith (the queen of Sheba—by no means Jewish—is a heroine in that tradition, after all) because, of course, the universe is so much larger than any particular religious tradition. The Wisdom tradition is feminine; wisdom is a *she* in the Bible and in most languages around the world. The excising of the Cosmic Christ in religion and culture during the modern era can be at least partially traced to patriarchy, which wants to focus on its anthropocentric and pessimistic agenda. Wisdom, after all, “walks the vaults of the sky and journeys on the sands of the deep” (Sirach 24:5–6); she “plays with God before the creation of the world” (Proverbs 8:22–31); she “pervades and permeates all things” (Wisdom 7:24); she is “a friend of the prophets” (Wisdom 7:27) and of artists (“there is wisdom in all creative works,” says Hildegard of Bingen [1098–1179]³). To say that the historical Jesus comes from the Wisdom tradition of Israel is to say that he comes from a *cosmic perspective and a feminist perspective*. His prayers and his teachings and parables are marinated in a cosmic sense.

Of course, this was true of most premodern peoples, indigenous religions, and the medieval consciousness (Thomas Aquinas [1225–1274] said every human being is *capax universi*, capable of the universe). Hildegard of Bingen, Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, to mention just a few premodern Christian spiritual geniuses, are all steeped in an awareness of the Cosmic or Universal Christ.⁴ It is only the modern era, so arrogant about the human, so patriarchal, so narcissistic, that wants to begin religion with mankind’s one claim to fame—original sin, a concept that I, and many after me, have demonstrated is not found in the Bible at all, but was invented by St. Augustine (354–430) in the very century when the church inherited the empire. Empires are not at home with cosmic religion. They want to play God, so an original-sin ideology does the empire’s dirty work

for it, getting people confused and afraid and ready to march to war for and bend their knee to imperial idols. As Thomas Merton (1915–1968) put it, when religious fundamentalism and imperial powers marry, get ready for “the greatest orgy of idolatry the world has ever known.”⁵

It is in this context that the brilliant psychologist Otto Rank (1884–1939) declared that, “when religion lost the cosmos in the West, society became neurotic and we had to invent psychology to deal with the ensuing neurosis.”⁶ A society without a cosmology is indeed neurotic, and so is a religion. Idols abound; so do suicides, meaninglessness, and addictions, which layer over the lack of meaning. Religious liturgies become rote and boring, without heart, energy, or transformative power. They are rendered boring and sinful when they leave the cosmos aside.

A Cosmic Christ is an Eco-Christ, for the reasons cited above, when I invoke the teachings of Thomas Berry. A Cosmic Christ is therefore a green Christ, as in this poem, “Deep Ecology,” by M. C. Richards (1916–1999):

Christ’s blood is green
in the branches,
blue in the violet.
Her bright voice
laughs in the night wind.
The big nova swells
in her breast.
Christ suckles us
With spring sap and
spreads earth under our feet.

O she loves us,
feeds us, tricks us with
her triple ways:
calls us soul,
calls us body, and spirit.
Calls us to her bed.⁷

IN A TIME of ecological apocalypse such as we face, it is no small thing to invoke anew the Cosmic and Eco and Green Christ. To do so is to celebrate anew the sacredness of the Earth, wake up to the crucifixion of Mother Earth, and stand up to today's empires and multi-national corporations that are busy nailing Gaia to a cross of extractive capitalism.

Albert Einstein (1879–1955) ruminated about religion and its utter failures vis a vis the Nazi menace and the holocaust. This was one of his conclusions: It was time for humanity to enter “the third phase of religious experience: cosmic religion. . . . The true religious genius has always been endowed with this sense of cosmic religion. . . . This oneness of creation, to my sense, is God. This concept of God will unite all nations.”⁸

The Cosmic Christ archetype resacralizes our Earth, our universe, our way of seeing the world. Buddhist scholar and activist Joanna Macy saw this clearly when she wrote, in response to the book *Stations of the Cosmic Christ*, “This book is revolutionary. It celebrates the sacred at the heart of the universe.” Yes, that is *exactly* what rediscovering this ancient and foundational teaching of the Gospels does—it celebrates the sacred at the heart of the universe. Isn't it time?

Several years ago, a woman approached me after a lecture, eager to talk. She said to me: “I love your book, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*. I love it so much I read it twice. It totally changed my life and brought me back to my Christian roots. But I have one question for you—What is the Cosmic Christ?” Now, this is a humbling moment for any author, but it was valuable too, for I learned from it. One thing I learned, meditating on this experience for about eleven years, is this: The Cosmic Christ will never be fully explained. It is not a product of dogma or doctrine; rather, it is *an experience*. All mysticism is about experience. That is why silence and/or art are the only languages for our mystical experience.

The Cosmic Christ is the light of the Divine that we experience in things, in events, in nature, in people, in beings of all kinds, from rocks to animals to oceans to trees, in “all our relations,” as the Lakota people pray. (See John 1.) Thomas Merton had a revelation when he was crossing a street in downtown Louisville, not far from his monastery. He saw all the strangers around him at rush hour, bathed in light. The next day he wrote this in his journal: “There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining

That is the Cosmic Christ: All beings are parts of holiness.

like the sun.”⁹ He tells us that “the Blinding One . . . speaks to us gently in ten thousand things. . . . He shines not on them but from within them.”¹⁰

But the Cosmic Christ is also the *wounds* in all things, for all beings suffer, as the Buddhists remind us and as the crucifixion archetype is telling us—provided we do not water it down by once again saying it is all about us and our sins, treating it as if it is a human and psychological event, not a cosmic one.

As an archetype, the Cosmic Christ is not restricted to Christianity. In the East, the concept of the Buddha Nature very much parallels that of the Cosmic Christ. When I lectured in South Korea a few years ago, a Buddhist monk came up to me afterward and said, “I’ve never heard about the Cosmic Christ and I like it a lot. I can hardly wait to start preaching about the Cosmic Buddha.” In Judaism, the concept of the image of God has been proven to apply to *all beings*.¹¹

In a book on Hildegard of Bingen, I offer a chapter on her teaching of the Cosmic Christ alongside that of North American poet and mystic Mary Oliver (1935-2019). Oliver, in her brilliant poem “At the River Clarion,”¹² talks of sitting on a rock in a river, listening to the water and the moss beneath the water. She hears them saying, “I am part of holiness.” The poet nails it. *That is the Cosmic Christ: All beings are parts of holiness*.¹³

Do we see? Are we there yet? Can we birth a culture and rebirth a religion with the sacred at its center, the Cosmic Christ (or Buddha Nature or Image of God) at its center? We had better do so, because time is running out for our species and for the planet as we know it. As Thomas Berry warned us, “It has been said, ‘We will not save what we do not love.’ It is also true that we will neither love nor save what we do not experience as sacred. . . . Eventually only our sense of the sacred will save us.”¹⁴ The Cosmic and Universal Christ reminds us how omnipresent the sacred is.

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NOTES

- 1 The Matthew Fox Legacy Project, “Stations of the Cosmic Christ,” <http://www.matthewfox.org/stations-of-the-cosmic-christ/>.
- 2 See Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 83–109 for further Biblical bases for the Cosmic Christ.
- 3 Matthew Fox, *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen* (Santa Fe: Bear, 1985), 49.
- 4 See Fox, *Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, 109–127 for a trip through the Cosmic Christ in the Middle Ages.
- 5 Quoted in Matthew Fox, *A Way to God: Thomas Merton’s Creation Spirituality Journey* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2016), 204.
- 6 As quoted in John James, *The Great Field: Soul at Play in a Conscious Universe* (Fulton, CA: Energy Psychology Press, 2007), 167.
- 7 M. C. Richards, *Opening Our Moral Eye: Essays, Talks & Poems Embracing Creativity & Community* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1996), 129.
- 8 Cited in Matthew Fox and Marc Andrus, *Stations of the Cosmic Christ* (Kansas City: Unity Books, 2018), 22.
- 9 Cited in Matthew Fox and Marc Andrus, *Stations of the Cosmic Christ* (Kansas City: Unity Books, 2018), 22.
- 10 Cited in Fox, *A Way to God*, 233.
- 11 Cited in Fox, *A Way to God*, 232.
- 12 See Rabbi David Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology: God’s Image in the More-Than-Human World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
- 13 Mary Oliver, “At the River Clarion,” *Evidence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 51.

- 14 See Matthew Fox, *Hildegard of Bingen, A Saint for Our Times: Unleashing Her Power in the 21st Century* (Vancouver: Namaste Publishing, 2012), chapter two.
- 15 Thomas Berry, foreword to Thomas Merton: *When the Trees Say Nothing: Writing on Nature*, ed. Kathleen Deignan (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2003), 18–19.