

MENDICANT

The Universal Christ

A Cosmic Notion of the Christ

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The revelation of the Risen Christ as universal and eternal was clearly affirmed in the Scriptures (Colossians 1, Ephesians 1, John 1, Hebrews 1) and in the early church, when the euphoria of the Christian faith was still creative and expanding. In our time, however, this deep mode of seeing must be approached as something of a reclamation project. When the Western church separated from the East in the Great Schism of 1054, we gradually lost this profound understanding of how God has been liberating and loving all that is. Instead, we gradually limited the Divine Presence to the single body of Jesus, *when perhaps it is as ubiquitous as light itself—and uncircumscribable by human boundaries.*

We might say that the door of faith closed on the broadest and most beautiful understanding of what early Christians called the “Manifestation,” the “Epiphany,” or most famously, the “Incarnation”—and also its final and full form, which we still call the “Resurrection.” But the Eastern and Orthodox churches originally had a much broader understanding of these, an insight that we in the Western churches, both Catholic and Protestant, are now only beginning to recognize. This is surely what John meant when he wrote in his Gospel, “The word became flesh” itself (John 1:14), using a universal and generic term (*sarx*) instead of referring to a single human body.¹ In fact, the lone word “Jesus” is never mentioned in John’s Prologue! Did you ever

notice that? “Jesus Christ” is finally mentioned, but not until the second-to-last verse.

We cannot overestimate the damage that was done to our Gospel message when the Eastern (“Greek”) and Western (“Latin”) churches split, beginning with their mutual excommunication of each other’s patriarchs in 1054. We have not known the “one, holy, undivided” church for over a thousand years.

But you and I can reopen that ancient door of faith with a key, and that key is the proper understanding of a word that many of us use often, but often too glibly. That word is *Christ*.

A cosmic notion of the Christ competes with and excludes no one, but includes everyone and everything.

♦
What if Christ is a name for *the transcendent within* of every “thing” in the universe?

♦
What if Christ is a name for the immense spaciousness of all true Love?

♦
What if Christ refers to an infinite horizon that pulls us from within and pulls us forward too?

♦
What if Christ is *another name for everything*—in its fullness?

I believe that is what the Big Tradition has been trying to say, maybe without even knowing it. But most of us were never

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exposed to the Full and Big Tradition, by which I mean the Perennial Tradition, the wisdom of the entire Body of Christ, the integration of the self-correcting themes that are constantly recurring and reaffirming one another in Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and the many brands of Protestantism. I know that is a huge goal, but do we have any choice now? If we emphasize the real essentials of faith, and not the accidentals, it is actually not so hard to do.

I think it's time we deeply explore these questions about Christ and the shape of reality for each of us. It's a quest that has fascinated and inspired me for over fifty years. In keeping with my Franciscan tradition, I want to ground a conversation of such immense scale in the stuff of earth so that we can follow it like a trail of crumbs through the forest: from nature; to a newborn child with his mother and father in a lowly stable; to the meaning and mystery in a name that might also be ours.

If my own experience is any indication, the message can transform the way we see and the way we live in our everyday world. It can offer us the deep and universal meaning that Western civilization seems to lack and long for today. It has the potential to reground Christianity as a natural religion and not one simply based on a special revelation, available only to a few lucky, enlightened people.

But to experience this new understanding, we must often proceed by indirection, by waiting, and by the practice of attentiveness. Especially as we begin, we must allow some of the words *to remain partially mysterious, at least for a while*. I know this can be dissatisfying and unsettling to our egoic mind, which wants to be in control every step of the way. Yet this is precisely the contemplative way of reading and listening, and thus being drawn forward into a much Larger Field.

I do not know who first said it, but I know I fully agree with this idea: *Our religion is not the church to which we belong, but the cosmos inside of which we live*. Once we know that the entire physical world around us, all of creation, is both the hiding place and the revelation place for God, this world becomes home, safe, enchanted, offering grace to any who look deeply. I call that kind of deep and calm seeing "contemplation."

The essential function of religion is to radically connect us with everything. (Re-ligio = to re-ligament or reconnect.) It is to help us see the world and ourselves in

wholeness, and not just in parts. Truly enlightened people see oneness because they look out from oneness, instead of labeling everything as superior and inferior, in or out. If we think we are privately "saved" or enlightened, then we are neither saved nor enlightened, it seems to me!

A cosmic notion of the Christ competes with and excludes no one, but includes everyone and everything (Acts 10:15, 28) and allows Jesus Christ to finally be a God figure worthy of the entire universe. In this understanding of the Christian message, the Creator's love and presence are grounded in the created world, and the mental distinction between "natural" and "supernatural" sort of falls apart. As Albert Einstein is supposed to have said, "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

Jesus did not come to Earth so theologians alone could understand and make their good distinctions, but so that "they *all* may be one" (John 17:21). He came to unite and "to reconcile all things in himself, everything in heaven and everything on earth" (Colossians 1:20). Every woman and man on the street should be able to see and enjoy this!



Christ is everywhere.

*In Him every kind of life has a meaning
and a solid connection.*



Sit with each sentence and, if need be, read them again until you feel their impact, until you can imagine their larger implications for the world, and for history, and for you. (In other words, until "the word becomes flesh" for you!)

¹ John Dominic Crossan makes this point rather convincingly in his book *Resurrecting Easter: How the West Lost and the East Kept the Original Easter Vision* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), a study of how differently Eastern and Western art understood and depicted the Resurrection.

Excerpted and adapted from the introduction to The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe, pages 4–8, by Richard Rohr, Convergent Books, 2019. Used with permission of the publisher.

A Reflection on the Universal Christ and Climate Change by Theologian and Scholar Sallie McFague

Augustine sees sin as “being curved in upon oneself”¹ rather than being open to God. In our ecological age, we now see that “being open to God” means being open to other creatures in mutual interdependence. We do not meet God only in Jesus of Nazareth, because God is also incarnate *in our world* as the universal Christ.



To love God by loving God’s world has meant different things in different times. For us, it is epitomized by climate change, the central crisis of the twenty-first century. Put simply, climate change is the result of too many human beings using too much energy and taking up too much space on the planet. Through excessive energy use and its accompanying greenhouse-gas emissions, we are changing the planet’s climate in ways that will make it uninhabitable for ourselves and many other species.

This is a strange “crisis” to face: It does not have the immediacy of a war or plague or tsunami. Rather, it has to do with *how* we live on a daily basis—the food we eat, the transportation we use, the luxuries and long-distance air travel we allow ourselves. We are not being called to fight an enemy; rather, the enemy is the very ordinary life we ourselves are leading. Yet, for all its presumed innocence, this way of life is both unjust to those who cannot attain this lifestyle and destructive of the very planet that supports us all.

What, then, would be an appropriate ethic for twenty-first-century people and especially for well-off, religious people? A distinguishing characteristic of most religions is some form of self-emptying. Often it takes the form of ego-

lessness, the attempt to open the self so that God can enter. In the Christian tradition, *kenosis* or self-emptying is seen as constitutive of God’s being in creation, the incarnation, and the cross. In creation, God limits the divine self, pulling in, so to speak, to allow space for others to exist. In the incarnation, as Paul writes in Philippians 2:7, God “emptied the divine self, taking the form of a slave,” and in the cross God gives of the divine self without limit. One understanding of Christian discipleship is as a “cruciform” life, imitating the self-giving of Christ for others.

Could we live and move and have our being in the universal Christ, participating in the insight and power of the incarnate God as we address space and energy—so we can live in radical interdependence with all other creatures? We are not alone as we face this challenge—the universal Christ is in, with, and for the world as we struggle with climate change.

¹ Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, Book XIV.

Excerpted from “*The Universal Christ and Climate Change*” by Sallie McFague, which will appear in the spring 2019 edition (vol. 7, no. 1) of *Oneing: “The Universal Christ.”* Published with permission of the author.

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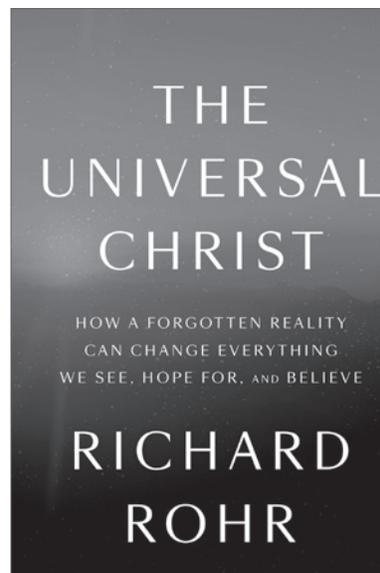
A BOOK REVIEW BY PAUL SWANSON

The Universal Christ:
*How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See,
Hope For, and Believe*
Richard Rohr
Convergent Books, 2019
On sale March 5, 2019.
(Available for pre-order now at store.cac.org.)

The Universal Christ is the first spirituality book I've ever read that was dedicated to a dog (Richard Rohr's late beloved black Lab, Venus). This is no small act, but a theological statement of beautiful proportions—more on that later. In *The Universal Christ*, Rohr names the cosmic and personal implications of Christ being constant, available, and continually manifesting through evolution. By weaving in many of the themes from his previous work, Rohr creates a tapestry that honors religion, history, psychology, science, and the inherent dignity of our shared planet.

The boldness of this book is in reclaiming what was already present in the Christian Tradition but was covered by the dust of duality, ignorance, and misuse of power. Rohr owns the missteps and curvy nature of the Christian Tradition, while naming the true, the good, and the beautiful present within it, “amorizing”¹ the way.

The distinction presented between Jesus and Christ is a relational game-changer. Rohr lays the foundation for a Jesus who “sets the bar for what it means to be fully human. And a Christ who is big enough to hold all creation together in one harmonious unity.”² I have read *The Universal Christ* three times now and, with each pass, new discoveries and deeper resonations are unearthed. One of the aspects of Rohr's writing for



which I am most grateful is his ability to distill infinite meaning into memorable six-word sentences. *The Universal Christ* is no exception; for example: “God loves things by becoming them.”³

That punchy sentence is worth meditating on for a lifetime. In that very sentence, you get the felt sense of what *The Universal Christ* is inviting you to embody, so that you can

turn around and see that “the proof that you are a Christian is that you can see Christ everywhere else.”⁴ Now, the message gets to be a slippery slope of seeing Christ in the particularities of life as an integral part of the larger whole: *this* body, *this* child, *this* bread, and *this* wine. The particular becomes a gateway to the universal. One might even call that a sacrament.

This brings me back to Rohr's dog, Venus. Stories of Venus are peppered throughout the pages of *The Universal Christ*, but most poignantly when Rohr relays the look in her eyes during her final days. The last lesson Venus taught Rohr was held in her gaze, mirroring and ultimately naming “all of this suffering and sadness as *the one sadness of God*.”⁵ That is the big invitation of *The Universal Christ*: to see Christ in every gaze we mirror back, as fearlessly as Rohr did with Venus.

¹ Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe* (New York: Convergent, 2019), 106.

² *Ibid.*, 107.

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

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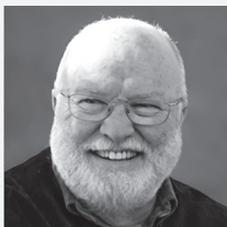
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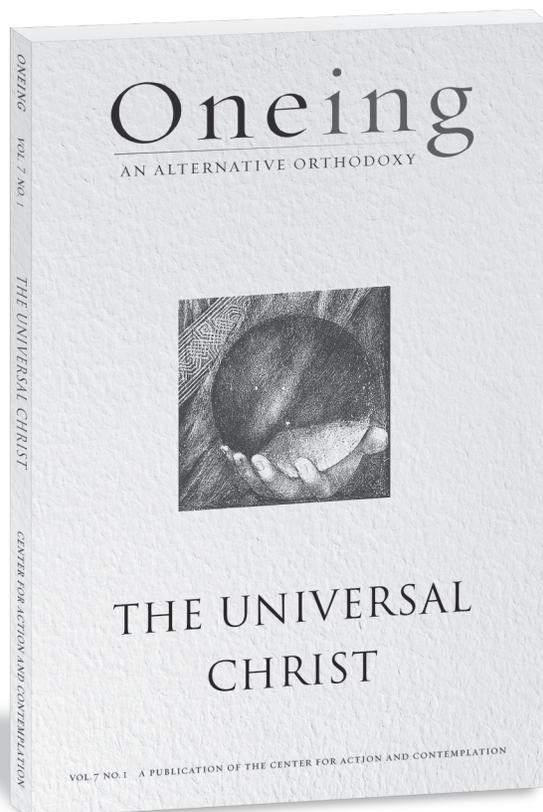
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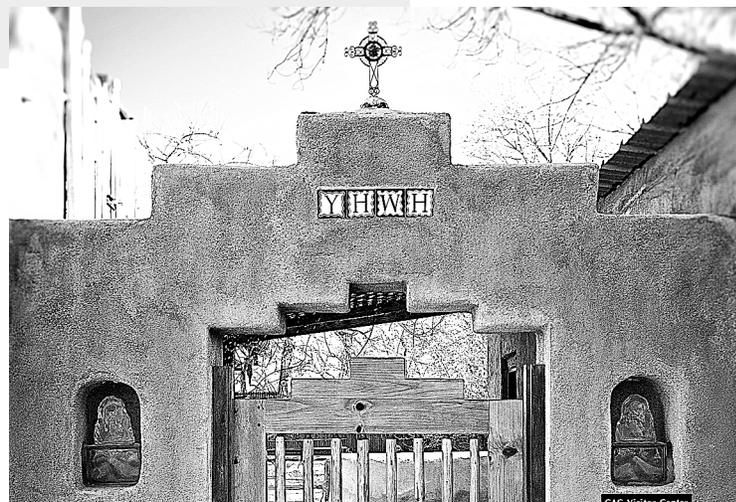
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