



Rescuing Jesus from traditional and progressive Christologies

Michael Morwood poses some challenging questions about our understanding of Jesus' role as "the Christ"



In this thought-provoking essay **Michael Morwood** raises questions that will be challenging to both traditionalist theologians and progressive theologians who have been searching for a better interpretation of the meaning of **Jesus** since the time of **Teilhard de Chardin** when the insights of modern science began to pose serious challenges to our theologies. This is a thought-provoking essay likely to be dismissed outright by the traditionalists and the fundamentalists but has the potential to encourage much reflection amongst those, following the likes of **Teilhard de Chardin**, who have been attempting to reinterpret **Jesus** as the "**Cosmic Christ**" as a way of enabling our traditional understandings of Christ to better fit with what we're learning about our universe from the sciences and modern scholarship.

Christ? What Happened to Jesus?

An essay by Michael Morwood

We are so accustomed to the name "**Jesus Christ**", and to using the word "**Christ**" in place of "**Jesus**", that it seems unthinkable to question whether we should continue to link "**Christ**" with **Jesus**.

Even though the meaning of "**Christ**" is fairly clear and obvious, the word may be the most misunderstood, misused, and misleading word in Christianity.

The origin of the term "**Christ**" in traditional theology and Christology...

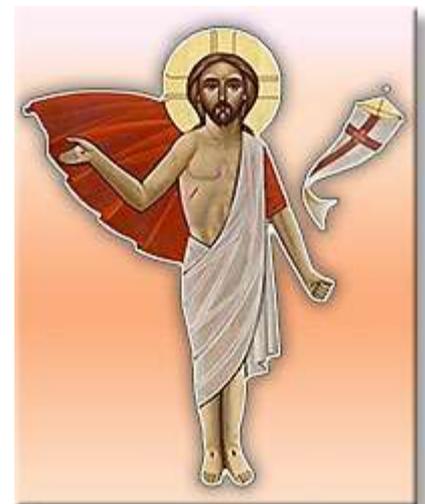
The word comes from translating the **Hebrew** word, *Masiah* (*messiah*) which means "*anointed*", with the **Greek** word for "*anointed*", *Khristós*. **Jesus**, then, was nominated in the **New Testament** as **God's anointed one**, the "**messiah**" or "**the Christ**".

For two thousand years Christianity has celebrated and honored **Jesus** as "**the Christ**". There has been no more important theological domain in the Christian Church than "**Christology**", the theological understanding of **Jesus** as "**the Christ**". **Christology** gave rise to the most vehement and disruptive disputes and divisions in the Church. It gave us the **Nicene Creed**. Consequently, **Christology**, with its precise and technical language explaining how **Jesus** alone is "**the Christ**" and who and what that means he is, has long been the measure of orthodoxy.

Christology is a field of study tightly controlled and protected by Church authority, not only because of what it says about Jesus, but perhaps even more so because it is used to give meaning and identity and purpose to the Church as an institution. The Church, supposedly, was founded by "**the Christ**" for a specific task. And, in keeping with its **Christology**, the institutional Church sees itself as uniquely appointed by **God** to lead all people to **God**. It is no wonder Roman Catholic leadership keeps very tight control over **Christological** thinking. **Traditional Christology** is allowed to be questioned.

Yet there is much to be questioned – and discarded – if our understanding of **Jesus'** importance to the contemporary world is to reach beyond the narrow, elitist claims of institutional Christianity.

The heart of the problem is that "**Christ**" and all the theology that goes with the word belong to a religious paradigm and an understanding of the cosmos that do not fit with contemporary questions



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about God or with contemporary data about our universe, or with contemporary efforts to understand the links between God-Jesus-universe-ourselves.

The most basic questions confronting theology about a **God** "choosing" a **Messiah** or **Christ figure** to do a specific task are rarely raised publicly for fear of offending Church authority.

Yet, in the light of what we now know about our universe, it would seem an obvious and necessary task for institutional Christianity to examine Christian theology based on the notion that a **Personal God, ruling from heaven, reacted strongly to a supposed fault by the first human beings, cut off access to "himself" and then mapped out a "plan of salvation" necessitating intervention from heaven, with **God** anointing someone, **the Christ**, for the task.**

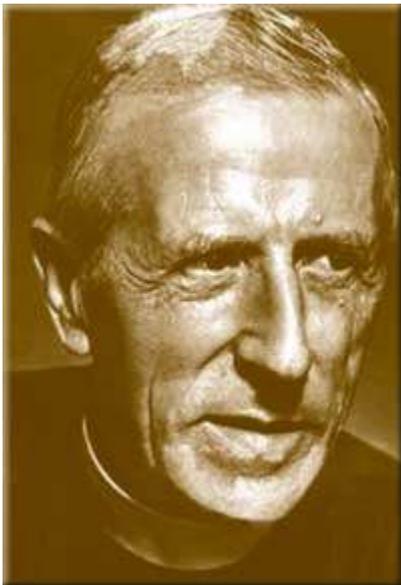
It would seem an obvious and necessary task to examine the idea that before the time of **Jesus** our cosmos and all of humanity was somewhat **Spirit-deprived** and that only through a chosen person, a messiah, a **"Christ" figure** ascending into the heavens, could humanity have access to **God's presence** or would **God's Spirit** be released upon the world.

It would seem an obvious and necessary task to examine whether **Jesus** in his preaching about **the kingdom of God** revealed any indication whatever that **God's presence with people** was dependent on him fulfilling a task. **Did Jesus think he was winning access to a God who had withdrawn from them or did Jesus think he was opening people's minds and hearts to the reality of God-always-with-them? This is a simple and basic question — and yet, it makes a significant difference to Christology, to Ecclesiology and to Sacramental Theology depending which way you answer it.** Traditional Christian Christology defends the proposition that **Jesus** uniquely won access to **God**, access lost through human sin. It staunchly defends the proposition that **"eternal life" with God** is only made possible by **Jesus being "the Christ"**, chosen by **God** to fulfill a specific task. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes it quite clear what was in **God's** mind and what the task of **"the Christ"** was: *"The Father handed his Son over to sinners in order to reconcile us with himself."* [CCC #614]

It would seem an obvious and necessary task to examine whether Jesus believed that God's forgiveness in any way was dependent on Jesus doing anything. Is it possible, or likely, or even as clear as daylight, that Jesus believed that God was by nature forgiving?

Yet traditional **Christology** makes God's forgiveness conditional on someone on this planet in a cosmic nowhere doing something. Isn't that just a little bit odd, just a little bit too constructed to fit in with the notion of **"the Christ"** accomplishing a task?

Progressive Christian thinkers are not free of problems either...



Teilhard de Chardin: was he guilty of endeavouring to put new wine into old wineskins?

There is a stream of progressive Christian thought, based on **St Paul** and often following **Teilhard de Chardin**, that sees itself freed from the **fall-redemption Christology**. **It often promotes an understanding of a "cosmic Christ" in place of a Christ figure who repairs the sin of Adam.** The emphasis in this theology is not on a story of an original fault, a story encased in a very limited understanding of the cosmos. **Rather, the focus is on contemporary understanding of the size of the universe and the evolutionary development of life on earth. In this context, "the Christ" assumes new meaning and a far bigger role. The Christ** is associated with **God** in the act of creation and with whatever **God's intent** for the universe may be. **Christ** is the beginning and the end. Everything that exists has its beginning in **"the Christ"** and will come to its final fulfillment in **"the Christ"**. **This "cosmic Christ" thinking marks a quantum leap from any understanding "messiah" had in Hebrew thinking – and in fact only came into prominence in the twentieth century in light of what is known today about evolutionary development.**

Yet in some ways, this progressive thought is akin to putting new wine into old wineskins. It is often a case of articulating an understanding of **"Christ"** within the framework of a "new story" about the universe and its origins and evolutionary development while at the

same time remaining rooted (as **Teilhard** was) in **classical, traditional Christological foundations**, namely:

- ▶ a **personal God** with a plan for the universe,

- ▶ the resurrection of **Jesus** as a religious "big bang" phenomenon that ushered in new connection with **God**,
- ▶ the **Spirit** being released in a new way upon creation because of **Jesus'** resurrection and ascension into heaven.

All of this thinking has its roots in a theological worldview that takes for granted that **God** is an elsewhere deity, that humanity was somehow disconnected from **God**, and that **the resurrection of Jesus** was the great moment of re-connection with **God** ushering in a "new creation".

This progressive thinking about a "**Cosmic Christ**" figure tries to fit with what is known about the universe today and it seeks to be inclusive of all people, but in fact it keeps stumbling over several factors that its proponents never seem to acknowledge:

- 1** **Did Jesus have even the slightest notion of the claims made for "the cosmic Christ"?** And if he didn't, (as I suspect he didn't), this thinking puts the cart before the horse. **Jesus** and his teaching almost seem irrelevant — and in fact has become so to many proponents of this thinking. It is a great pity to hear so many "progressive" Christians who are immersed in a "new story of the universe" asking where **Jesus** fits into the "new" thinking.
- 2** To what extent is "**cosmic Christ**" thinking reliant on a mystical experience of **Paul** and **Paul's** grand vision of reality — at the expense of **Jesus'** preaching about the *here and now* importance of establishing "**God's kingdom here on earth**"?

Paul's grand vision of a new creation, while lofty and full of idealism, led to a monumental theological shift: the importance of **Jesus** was heavenly, not earthly. Consequently, theology became fixated on this heavenly figure and who he was and why he had to be so different from the rest of us in order to achieve the heavenly task.

I think Paul put the cart before the horse and distracted Christianity for 2000 years by putting the emphasis in the heavens rather than on earth.

- 3** **If "cosmic Christ" points to a reality that is way beyond the limitations of Christian thinking and is inclusive of all people and all religions and the totality of the universe and its past, present and future, why keep using the word, "Christ" which is so linked to the Christian religion and has a particular, limited understanding within Jewish and Christian thought?**

An alternative way of understanding the role of Jesus...

There is another way to think about God and Jesus and revelation and the world and all its people — and I believe that "Christ" language is not at all helpful, or even meaningful, in this thinking.

Some key elements in this thinking are:

- 1. The mystery we call "God" is beyond our human notions of "person" and the way we humans observe, react, think, plan and intervene.**
- 2. The universality of consciousness and energy are worthwhile contemporary pointers to this divine presence permeating and sustaining everything that exists.**
- 3. God is mystery beyond all knowing, a mystery always present and active – like "the breath" moving through all that exists.**
- 4. God is the mystery that underpins all that exists and can never be absent or disconnected from our world. It makes no sense whatever to assert that the divine presence can ever be separated from what exists because that presence is the cause and sustainer of all that exists**
- 5. God is manifested in our universe and in our world through observable patterns, such as those in evolutionary development on earth.**
- 6. Some of the key patterns are: working together, co-operation, moving to stages beyond the possibility of units not working together.**
- 7. The human species emerged from the divine presence at work through these and other patterns.**
- 8. The human species, as with all life forms, emerged within the divine.**

9. **The divine presence**, the mystery we call, "**God**", has been, is, and always will be, present with the human endeavor and all of reality, constantly manifesting or giving expression to itself in the on-going developments. Revelation comes from the ground up, from within the human community and all that exists, not from heaven down.
10. **The divine presence**, operating within the human community, will naturally be given wonderful expression in people we see as "gifted" whether that be in art, music, science, philosophy, religious insight or any human field of achievement. We would expect **the divine presence** to manifest itself clearly in men and women throughout the ages who would stress the need to work together, to co-operate with one another, to avoid violence and selfishness, and to care for one another.
11. **Jesus** came from **God** – but *not* from a **God up above**, but **the always present, active divine presence**. **Jesus** gave that **divine presence** a wonderful way to manifest itself.
12. **Jesus**, like other great religious leaders, gave wonderful, clear articulation of how men and women are to live in harmony with one another and to give the best possible human expression to the divine at work.
13. It is **the message of Jesus** that is of **divine essence**. It is the message that must be heard.
14. When **Jesus** died, he died into the ebb and flow of **the divine always present**.
15. "**Christ**" language and notions have effectively distracted Christians for 2,000 years from hearing the good and challenging news that **Jesus** preached. The followers of **Jesus** became "**Christians**". It is time to examine what the word entails and to reflect to what extent Christianity locked itself into theological thinking and institutional agendas around "**Christ**" that have little to do with **Jesus'** preaching and what he was ready to die for.
16. The information we have today about our universe and our planet and ourselves provides a new and more relevant context in which to tell **the story of Jesus** and how he gave human expression to **the Mystery of God** and what we desperately need, as a species, not just as Christians, to learn from his insights and preaching.

If we focus on **Jesus**, we focus on a human reality, on human experience, and the insights of someone living that experience. We can then bring that reality, experience and the insights to our living and our questioning today. To focus on **Jesus** is to focus on how to give the best possible human expression to **the divine always present**, everywhere, in our universe. To focus on **Jesus** leads to affirmation of the divine presence with us – and considerable challenge to give that presence "free reign" in all we do. To focus on **Jesus** is somehow open-ended. Being right or wrong is not the issue. **The issue is how to live gives that give clear expression to the divine within all of us.**

If we focus on **Christ**, whether we are aware of it or not, we are locking ourselves into institutional religion's notions about God that are time and culturally conditioned. And more importantly, those notions are fiercely defended by the religious institution because they give the institution unique identity. **Christ** is misleading. It takes us away from **Jesus** and into the world of outdated institutional concepts of **God** and the defence of the religious institution's identity. In this world, institutional leadership holds supreme control and tolerates no questioning as it constructs creeds and "tradition" and "authoritative teachings" that are not to be questioned. This is the world of thought control. **Jesus would never be at home in this environment – and on this ground alone it is surely time for us to give serious thought to whether we should continue to link Jesus and Christ so blithely.**

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Michael Morwood is the resident theologian at the Kirkridge Retreat Center, at Bangor in Pennsylvania. The author of numerous books exploring theology in a contemporary world view, **Michael** is a much sought after presenter of programs and retreats in the United States and Canada. This essay provides an overview some programs he will be conducting at various locations early in 2012.

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