

**"Anyone who strives to put their faith into action will find encouragement and inspiration in the pages of this book."
—MELINDA GATES**

FROM ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST INFLUENTIAL SPIRITUAL THINKERS, A LONG-AWAITED BOOK EXPLORING WHAT IT MEANS THAT JESUS WAS CALLED "CHRIST" AND HOW THIS FORGOTTEN TRUTH CAN RESTORE HOPE AND MEANING TO OUR LIVES

In his decades as a globally recognized teacher, Richard Rohr has helped millions realize what is at stake in matters of faith and spirituality. Yet Rohr has never before thoroughly addressed the most perennially discussed topic in Christianity: the relationship between Jesus and Christ. Most know who Jesus was, but who was Christ? Is the word simply Jesus's last name? Too often, Rohr writes, our understandings have been limited by culture, religious debate, and the human tendency to put ourselves at the center.

Drawing on scripture, history, and spiritual practice, Rohr articulates a transformative view of Jesus Christ as a portrait of God's constant, unfolding work in the world. "God loves things by becoming them," he writes, and Jesus's life was meant to declare that humanity has never been separate from God—except by its own negative choice. When we recover this fundamental truth, faith becomes less about proving Jesus was God, and more about learning to recognize the Creator's presence all around us and in everyone we meet.

Thought-provoking, practical, and full of deep hope and vision, *The Universal Christ* is a landmark book from one of our most beloved spiritual writers, and an invitation to contemplate how God liberates and loves all that is.

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THE UNIVERSAL CHRIST RICHARD ROHR



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

"I cannot put this book down." —BONO

WITH A NEW
AFTERWORD BY
THE AUTHOR

THE UNIVERSAL CHRIST

HOW A FORGOTTEN REALITY
CAN CHANGE EVERYTHING
WE SEE, HOPE FOR, AND BELIEVE

RICHARD ROHR

FOREWORD BY BRIAN D. McLAREN

Likewise, I have known many Evangelicals who “received Jesus into their hearts” but still felt the need to “get saved” again every Friday night. Did they not believe that a real transformation happened when they made a genuine surrender and reconnected to their Source? Most of us understandably start the journey assuming that God is “up there,” and our job is to transcend this world to find “him.” We spend so much time trying to get “up there,” we miss that God’s big leap in Jesus was to come “down here.” So much of our worship and religious effort is the spiritual equivalent of trying to go up what has become the down escalator.

I suspect that the “up there” mentality is the way most people’s spiritual search has to start. But once the real inner journey begins—once you come to know that, in Christ, God is forever overcoming the gap between human and divine—the Christian path becomes less about climbing and performance, and more about descending, letting go, and unlearning. Knowing and loving Jesus is largely about becoming fully human, wounds and all, instead of ascending spiritually or thinking we can remain unwounded. (The ego does not like this fundamental switch at all, so we keep returning to some kind of performance principle, trying to climb out of this messy incarnation instead of learning from it. This is most early-stage religion.)

Jesus offered the world a living example of fully embodied Love that emerged out of our ordinary, limited life situations. For me, this is the real import of Paul’s statement that Jesus was “born of a woman under the Law” (Galatians 4:4). In Jesus, God became part of our small, homely world and entered into human limits and ordinariness—and remained anonymous and largely invisible for his first thirty years. Throughout his life, Jesus himself spent no time climbing, but a lot of time descending, “emptying himself and becoming as all humans are” (Philippians 2:7), “tempted in every way that we are” (Hebrews 4:15) and “living in the limitations of weak-

ness” (Hebrews 5:2). In this chapter, I would like to consider such a path, and what it means for you and me.

The Divine Map

Jesus walked, enjoyed, and suffered the entire human journey, and he told us that we could and should do the same. His life exemplified the unfolding mystery in all of its stages—from a hidden, divine conception, to a regular adult life full of love and problems, punctuated by a few moments of transfiguration and enlightenment, and all leading to glorious ascension and final return. As Hebrews 4:15 states, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who was like us in every way, experienced every temptation, and never backtracked” (my translation). We do not need to be afraid of the depths and breadths of our own lives, of what this world offers us or asks of us. We are given permission to become intimate with our own experiences, learn from them, and allow ourselves to descend to the depth of things, even our mistakes, before we try too quickly to transcend it all in the name of some idealized purity or superiority. *God hides in the depths and is not seen as long as we stay on the surface of anything—even the depths of our sins.*

Remember, the archetypal encounter between doubting Thomas and the Risen Jesus (John 20:19–28) is not really a story about believing in the fact of the Resurrection, but a story about believing that someone could *be wounded and also resurrected at the same time!* That is a quite different message, and still desperately needed. “Put your finger here,” Jesus says to Thomas (20:27). And, like Thomas, we are indeed wounded and resurrected at the same time—all of us. In fact, this might be the primary pastoral message of the whole Gospel.

Earlier, I wrote that great love and great suffering (both healing and woundedness) are the universal, always available paths of transformation, because they are the only things strong enough to take away the ego's protections and pretensions. Great love and great suffering bring us back to God, with the second normally following the first, and I believe this is how Jesus himself walked humanity back to God. It is not just a path of resurrection rewards, but always a path that includes death and woundedness.

St. Bonaventure (1221–1274) taught that, "As a human being Christ has something in common with all creatures. With the stones he shares existence, with plants he shares life, with animals he shares sensation, and with the angels he shares intelligence."¹ In saying this, Bonaventure was trying to give theological weight to the deep experience of St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), who as far as we know, was the first recorded Christian to call animals and elements and even the forces of nature by familial names: "Sister, Mother Earth," "Brother Wind," "Sister Water," and "Brother Fire."

Francis was fully at home in this created world. He saw all things in the visible world as endless dynamic and operative symbols of the Real, a theater and training ground for a heaven that is already available to us in small doses in this life. *What you choose now, you shall have later* seems to be the realization of the saints. Not an idyllic hope for a later heaven but a living experience right now.

We cannot jump over this world, or its woundedness, and still try to love God. We must love God *through, in, with,* and even *because of* this world. This is the message Christianity was supposed to initiate, proclaim, and encourage, and what Jesus modeled. We

¹ Bonaventure, *Sermon I, Dom II in Quad.* (IX, 215–219), trans. Zachary Hayes, "Christ Word of God and Exemplar of Humanity," *The Cord* 46.1 (1996): 13.

were made to love and trust this world, "to cultivate it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15), but for some sad reason we preferred to emphasize the statement from Genesis 1, which seems to say that we should "dominate" the earth (1:28). Within one generation we became killers of our brothers (Genesis 4:8). I wonder if this is not another shape of our original sin. God "empties himself" into creation (Philippians 2:7), and then we humans spent most of history creating systems to control and subdue that creation for our own purposes and profit, reversing the divine pattern.

Do not think I am talking about believing only what you can see with your eyes, or proposing mere materialism. I am talking about *observing, touching, loving the physical, the material, the inspired universe—in all of its suffering state*—as the necessary starting place for any healthy spirituality and any true development. Death *and* resurrection, not death *or* resurrection. This is indeed the depth of everything. *To stay on the surface of anything is invariably to miss its message—even the surface meaning of our sinfulness.*

Jesus invited Thomas and all doubters into a *tangible* kind of religion, a religion that makes touching human pain and suffering the way into both compassion and understanding. For most of us, the mere touching of another's wound probably feels like an act of outward kindness; we don't realize that its full intended effect is to change us as much as it might change them (there is no indication that Jesus changed, only Thomas). Human sympathy is the best and easiest way to open the heart space and to make us live inside our own bodies. God never intended most human beings to become philosophers or theologians, but God does want all humans to represent the very sympathy and empathy of God. And it's okay if it takes a while to get there.

Our central message again bears repeating: *God loves things by becoming them. We love God by continuing the same pattern.*

Always and Only the Incarnation

Christianity's unique trump card is always and forever incarnation. This is why the only heresies that have been condemned in every century under different names are those that sought to deny the Incarnation, or undermine it with heady spiritualism or pious romanticism. This tendency was generically called "Gnosticism," and I sometimes wonder if the church condemned it so much because we unconsciously knew how heady and Gnostic we ourselves were. "Condemn it over there instead of own it over here" is the operative and common policy of institutions of power. But as the poet and wisdom figure Wendell Berry loves to tell us, "*what we need is here.*"² Humanity has grown tired of grand, overarching societal plans like communism and Nazism, and of disembodied spiritualities that allow no validation or verification in experience. Too often they hide an agenda of power and control, obfuscating and distracting us from what is right in front of us. This is exactly what we do when we make the emphasis of Jesus's Gospel what is "out there" as opposed to what is "in here." For example, insisting on a literal belief in the virgin birth of Jesus is very good theological symbolism, but unless it translates into a spirituality of interior poverty, readiness to conceive, and human vulnerability, it is largely a "mere lesson memorized" as Isaiah puts it (29:13). It "saves" no one. Likewise, an intellectual belief that Jesus rose from the dead is a good start, but until you are struck by the realization that the crucified and risen Jesus is a parable about the journey of all humans, and even the universe, it is a rather harmless—if not harmful—belief that will leave you and the world largely unchanged.

We are now acquiring and accessing more of the skills we need

² Wendell Berry, "The Wild Geese," in *Collected Poems* (Berkeley: North Point Press, 1984), 155–156.

to go into the depths of things—and to find God's spirit there. Whether they come through psychology, trained spiritual direction, the Enneagram, Myers-Briggs typology, grief and bereavement work, or other models such as Integral Theory or wilderness training,³ these tools help us to examine and to trust interiority and depth as never before. One of the most profound spiritual experiences of my life came in 1984, during a journaling retreat led by the psychotherapist Ira Progoff. At this retreat, held in Dayton, Ohio, Progoff guided us as we wrote privately for several days on some very human but ordinary questions. I remember first dialoguing with my own body, dialoguing with roads not taken, dialoguing with concrete events and persons, dialoguing with my own past decisions, on and on.

I learned that if the quiet space, the questions themselves, and blank pages had not been put in front of me, I may never have known what was lying within me. Dr. Progoff helped me and many others access slow tears and fast prayers, and ultimately often intense happiness and gratitude, as I discovered depths within myself that I never knew were there. I still reread some of what I wrote over forty years ago for encouragement and healing. And it all came from within me!

Today we have freedom and permission and the tools to move toward depth as few people ever had in human history. What a shame it would be if we did not use them. The best way *out* is if we have first gone *in*. The only way we can trust *up* is if we have gone *down*. That had been the underlying assumption of male initiation rites since ancient times, but today, such inner journeys, basic initiation experiences, are often considered peripheral to "true religion."

³ Illuman.org, Outward Bound, Bill Plotkin's Animas training, New Warrior Training, et cetera.

Permission to Go "In" and "Down"

If you think I am emphasizing the experiential too much, just remember that both Jesus and Paul trusted their own experience of God against the status quo of their own Jewish religion. This deep trust led Paul to oppose Peter, the supposed first pope, "to his face" over the issue of whether Gentile converts should be required to undergo the Jewish rite of circumcision (Galatians 2:11–13). Paul and his ministry partner, Barnabas, soon repeated the same arguments to the whole leadership team of early Christianity in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1–12), and further insisted on the inclusion of the entire Gentile world (which is most of us). And they did so with no justification of authority beyond whatever it was that Paul *experienced* on the Damascus Road and thereafter. Paul rejecting circumcision, as he does more than once (see Galatians 5:11), would be like me denying the importance of baptism. Jesus defending his disciples' practice of working on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1ff.) would be like me saying that Mass on Tuesday is just as good as Mass on Sunday. (Of course, it actually is, except for the historic consensus that Sunday is the agreed-upon time for community worship.) "By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?" the priests and elders rightly ask (Matthew 21:23) of Jesus. I must admit that I would probably have asked the same hard questions of both Jesus and Paul.

It's no stretch to say that the New Testament faith was, in effect, written by two men who profoundly relied upon their inner experience of the ways of God despite a totally dominant consciousness that insisted otherwise. How did they get away with it? The answer is, in their lifetimes, they largely didn't. Only later did saints and scholars see that Jesus and Paul had drawn upon the deepest sources of their own tradition to then totally reframe that tradition for the larger world. They, like all the prophets, were "radical tradi-

tionists." *You can only reform things long term by unlocking them from inside—by their own chosen authoritative sources.* Outsiders have little authority or ability to reform anything.

All traditions and traditionalists are searching for sacred objects, places, events, and people on which to found their authority, and this is normal and good. Once we find such a foundation, we make pilgrimages, write scriptures, visit tombs, create customs till they become sacrosanct traditions. We kiss holy rocks, paint art, create sacred architecture, weep with sincerity, and offer devotion to our symbol of the Absolute. But these totems, rituals, tombs (or empty tomb, in our case), and holy places are just early signposts to set us on the path. The full mystery of incarnation, on the other hand, points not just to things, but to the *depth* of things, the fullness of things, the soul of things, and what some have called the "angels of things."

In his book *Unmasking the Powers*, theologian and biblical scholar Walter Wink makes a very convincing case that this intuition about the inherent sacredness of creation is precisely what sacred texts are pointing toward when they speak of "angels."⁴ An angel, Wink believed, is *the inner spirit or soul of a thing*. When we honor the "angel" or soul of a thing, we respect its inner spirit. And if we learn how to pay attention to the soul of things—to see the "angels" of elements, animals, the earth, water, and skies—then we can naturally work our way back through the Great Chain of Being to the final link, whom many call God. Don't waste your time deconstructing your primitive belief about pretty, winged creatures in flowing pastel dresses. If you do so, you are seriously missing out on what they are pointing to. *We need to reconstruct, and not just continue to deconstruct.* Then you will see angels everywhere.

⁴ Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

What I am saying in this chapter is that there must be a way to be both *here* and in the *depth of here*. Jesus is the here, Christ is the depth of here. This, in my mind, is the essence of incarnation, and the gift of contemplation. We must learn to love and enjoy things as they are, in their depth, in their soul, and in their fullness. Contemplation is the “second gaze,” through which you see something in its particularity and yet also in a much larger frame. You know it by the joy it gives, which is far greater than anything it does for you in terms of money, power, or success.

Two pieces of art have given me this incarnational and contemplative insight. The first was one I saw in a Nuremberg art museum by Hans Kulmbach. It portrays the two human feet of Jesus at the very top of a large painting of the Ascension. Most of the canvas is taken up by the apostles, who are being drawn up with Christ with their eyes, as the two feet move off the top of the painting, presumably into the spiritual realms. The image had a wonderful effect on me. I too found myself looking beyond the painting toward the ceiling of the art museum, my eyes drawn elsewhere for the message. It was a real religious moment, one that simultaneously took me beyond the painting and right back into the room where I was standing. It was another instance of understanding the Christ in a collective sense, not just his ascension but also ours. Look at texts like Colossians 2:11–15 and Ephesians 2:4–6, and notice how they clearly present salvation in both the past tense and the collective sense. Why did we never notice this?

The second piece of art is a bronze statue of St. Francis, located in the upper basilica of Assisi, Italy. Created by a sculptor whose name is hidden, the statue shows Francis gazing down into the dirt with awe and wonder, which is quite unusual and almost shocking. The Holy Spirit, who is almost always pictured as descending from above, is pictured here as coming from below—even to the point of being hidden in the dirt! I’ve made sure I go see this statue when-

ever I return to Assisi, but I fear most people miss it, because it is small and set off to the side—just like the Christ message itself. “Truly, you are a hidden God,” Isaiah says (45:15). God is hidden in the dirt and mud instead of descending from the clouds. This is a major transposition of place. Once you know that the miracle of “Word made flesh” has become the very nature of the universe, you cannot help but be both happy and holy. What we first of all need is here!

Both these pieces of art put the two worlds together, just from different perspectives. Yet in both images, *it is the Divine that takes the lead in changing places*. Maybe artists have easier access to this Mystery than many theologians? The right brain often gets there faster and more easily than the left brain, and we let the left brainers take over our churches.

I doubt if you can see the image of God (*Imago Dei*) in your fellow humans if you cannot first see it in rudimentary form in stones, in plants and flowers, in strange little animals, in bread and wine, and most especially cannot honor this objective divine image in yourself. It is a full-body tune-up, this spiritual journey. It really ends up being *all or nothing, here and then everywhere*.

Respect, Wonder, Reverence

This change of perspective, to bottom-up and inside-out, can take the form of religious language or totally secular language. Words are not the reality itself (the *Ding an sich*, as the Germans say). We all know *respect* when we see it (re-spect = to see a second time). We all know *reverence* because it softens our gaze. *Any object that calls forth respect or reverence is the “Christ” or the anointed one for us at that moment*, even though the conduit might just look like a committed research scientist, an old man cleaning up the beach, a