

The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe, by Richard Rohr

A Critique by Catholic Author and Spiritual Director, Philip St. Romain

As one who has companioned many people as a Christian spiritual director for over 30 years, I'm very familiar with Richard Rohr's writings, and have, without hesitation, encouraged those I meet with to make use of them all along. I have several misgivings about this present work, however. Sections of it are deeply moving and insightful; chapter 10 on Mary, for example, is superb, and chapter 12 on the meaning of the crucifixion is also powerful and informative. It's also good to hear Fr. Rohr speak so positively about some aspects of Catholic teaching and practice. But the way he has set things up in this book is problematic, in my opinion. As he noted on p. 64 of the hardback edition, "good theology will have a hard time making up for bad anthropology," and that's the main problem, in my view, along with several others that I will enumerate below.

1. His use of the term, "Christ"

When Jesus asks his Apostles, "Who do people say that I am?" Peter responds, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Jesus affirmed this response. (Mt. 16:13-17). This reference to Jesus as the Christ is found throughout the New Testament. It means, "anointed one," and is a synonym for "messiah." Who is the Christ? It is Jesus of Nazareth.

Throughout this book, however, Rohr uses the term "Christ" as basically a synonym for "Logos," the Word of God, Who is God (John 1:1) rather than as a referent to Jesus. The New Testament does use the term "Christ" in a cosmic sense in places (e.g., Col. 1), but when doing so, it is usually making some connection with Jesus — as in Col. 1:18-20. The Logos is God, and Jesus is the Logos-incarnate, who is called the Christ.

The Logos exists before the Incarnation and sustains the universe at all times, as Christians have always known (contrary to the subtitle of the book). But the ascended Jesus is also cosmically present, "seated at the right hand of the Father," God's agent

for transforming the human race and all of creation. The ascended Christ is universally present and available to all. By conflating the terms Christ and Logos, Rohr blurs the distinction between pre-existing Logos and the ascended cosmic Christ. Both are “universal” in reach and concern, but it is the ascended, cosmic Christ that Paul is referring to when he speaks of the creation being “in Christ.”

Rohr wants “Christ” to be the term that can “reground Christianity as a natural religion and not one simply based on a special revelation” (p. 6).^{*} But a “special revelation” is what the term “Christ” traditionally indicates, and there’s just no getting around that. The Logos theology of early fathers like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and, recently, Pope Benedict and others recognized a broader context for the saving work of the Logos in history, but they did not conflate this with the unique revelation of Jesus as the Christ.

2. Creation

On p. 43 Rohr refers to himself as a panentheist (God in creation and creation in God), but what he actually describes seems more pantheistic. Traditional Christian teaching affirms a duality, God as one kind of Being, creation as beings made by God. For Rohr, however, it’s much, much cozier than that: “Everything visible, without exception, is the outpouring of God” (p. 13). And, “Long before Jesus’ personal incarnation, Christ was deeply imbedded in all things — *as all things*” (pp. 13, 14). Creation is a first incarnation of God (pp. 12, 13), and matter itself is “the very body of God (p. 16).” Later in the book, in the chapter on Eucharist, he comes on even stronger: “The universe is the Body of God, both in its essence and in its suffering” (p. 134). The term, “essence,” generally indicates the real nature of a thing, so it sounds like he is saying that the essence of God and the universe are the same, which is a different usage of the term than one finds in traditional Christian theology and philosophy. Essence describes “what” something is — God-ness, or human-ness, for example. God’s essence is unlimited existence, knowing, loving, etc.; this cannot be said of any creature for creatures have limitations. Rohr, it seems, wants to ground the goodness of the creature in an unshakeable foundation — hence, his use of the term, incarnation, but that’s putting the matter forward in a way that obfuscates the traditional use to the term, incarnation. Traditional Christian teaching affirms the innate goodness of all creatures, for they owe their existence to a good and loving

God, from Whom they are distinct, though not separate.

3. Jesus and creation

Rohr does acknowledge that Jesus is the Logos-incarnate. But, “Jesus came out of an already Christ-soaked world” (p. 15). Although he (Jesus) is considered the anointed one, what he really reveals is that “all is anointed” (p. 20). This would be consistent with a pantheistic view of creation, as indeed Rohr states in language that suggests a key statement in the Nicene Creed: “Everything that exists in material form is the offspring of some Primal Source, which originally existed only as Spirit (p. 12).” “Offspring” = “begotten, not made.” I’m sure the phrasing here is not accidental; Rohr is being provocative.. But if you still don’t get it, “Most Catholics and Protestants still think of the incarnation as a one-time and one-person event having only to do with the person of Jesus of Nazareth, instead of a cosmic event that has soaked all of history in the Divine Presence from the very beginning” (p. 28). Well, yes, that’s precisely how most Christians think of the incarnation, and rightly so. For Rohr, then, Jesus is the second incarnation of God to show us that we and all of creation are already incarnations of God (p. 12). This equivocation of the creation as a first incarnation and body of God with Jesus as a second incarnation and body of God is heterodox, yet this perspective informs almost everything in the book. It is the book’s chief flaw.

4. Sin and evil

One wonders, then, what is a creature, for Rohr? Such understanding is foundational for theology and spirituality, and Rohr is most vague about this. As he is a Catholic priest, our presumption should be that his view is that of the Church, but we’ve already seen that he departs significantly, at least in his conceptualization of creation. If our essence is divine — that we are all incarnations of God, then why are we out-of-touch with this? Why would any essentially divine being do wrong, commit evil acts? Traditional Christian anthropology holds that creatures are simultaneously one-with and distinct-from God — an ontological duality — and this introduces the possibility of being in a real relationship with God. It also introduces the possibility of sin and evil. In parts of Rohr’s book, he seems to take for granted this ontological distinction between the creature and God, acknowledging the reality of sin as well (he

contradicts himself in other areas as well). But sin, for Rohr, seems to be more about ignorance of our connectedness with all things — lack of an “incarnational worldview” (p. 18). Traditional Christian teaching recognizes ignorance as a problem as well, but roots sin more in the will, as a lack of power to do the good, or a willful resistance to doing so.

5. Significance of Jesus

Does the Incarnation of Jesus do anything to deepen or heal the relations between God and human? Does he have anything to do with our experience of divine life besides reveal to us that we are not-separate from the divine?

In traditional understanding, Jesus re-connects the human race with God in his person and blesses us with the Holy Spirit to empower us to overcome sin and live a life of love. The re-connecting process invariably mentions him dying for us, or dying for our sins, the meaning of this being understood in different ways. There’s no getting around this. Even that wonderful reference to the Cosmic Christ in Col. 1 ends up professing, “for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” As good as Rohr’s chapter on the atonement really is, it does not touch on any of these traditional themes. More than anything else, Jesus, for Rohr, is the revealer of God’s unconditional love who shows us that we are already good and loved and one with everything, including God. That’s all fine and well, but there’s something missing, here.

Rohr considers it a theological error to view Jesus as God (p. 19), and notes that Jesus did not teach us to worship him, which is true. But the New Testament reports several instances of people worshiping Jesus even during his life — by the Magi when he was an infant, and his apostles in the boat (Mt. 14:33), for example. Revelations 5:13 states that “every creature in heaven and on earth gives praise and glory to the Lamb (Jesus) forever and ever.” It’s OK to worship Jesus.

Rohr sometimes expresses strange dichotomies between Jesus and Christ. For example, “When your isolated ‘I’ turns into a connected ‘we,’ you have moved from Jesus to Christ (p. 37).” This sounds all the more bizarre if you are accustomed, as most Christians are, to regarding Jesus and the Word as a unified whole, the Christ. Jesus and Christ are split again when he writes, “To be loved by Jesus enlarges our

heart capacity. To be loved by Christ enlarges our mental capacity (p. 36).” Just how one can be loved by Jesus without being loved simultaneously by Christ is baffling, for Jesus is the human means through which the incarnate Word expresses. They act as one. When, later in the book (chapter 16), he stresses the importance of contemplative awareness over reason, one wonders how this squares with what he wrote about Christ and mentality. Reason, he states, on p. 205, thinks in a binary manner, but that’s just not true. Reason is perfectly capable of holistic understandings, of recognizing the both/and of things, and that some teachings can be partially true and partially false. Reason is capable of understanding and affirming connectedness, even contributing to the awakening of awe and wonder. Contemplative awareness is a good thing, but it needs to be integrated with reason. The Logos is not just about light and seeing; it’s also about intelligibility, which is a vital characteristic of the creation. Jesus said that the truth would set us free (John 8:32). Try comprehending truth without using your reason! I’m always wary when spiritual writers discount reason, as this tends to discourage any rational critique of their work, or else gives them a reason to discount critique because it’s “dualistic.”

Missing in this account of the Logos and Christ is a Trinitarian context. I know Rohr has written a book recently on the Trinity, but it would help if he had said something in this work about the relationship between the Logos and the Father, and the Spirit. Jesus speaks often of his divine Family members; he is about doing the will of the Father, and states that it is better for him to go (die) so he can send the Spirit to us (John 16:7). This gives a fuller understanding of the role of Christ in the grand scheme of things. Rohr’s silence on this Trinitarian context is unusual and he should include more on this in a possible next edition.

6. Jesus and resurrection

Rohr believes in the bodily resurrection of Jesus “because it affirms what the whole physical and biological universe is also saying” (p. 171). It would be better, however, if he believed it as a mystery of our faith, as Christians have from the first. Continuing his teaching on a deep connection between the first incarnation of creation and the second of Jesus, he states that resurrection is the “universal and observable pattern of everything. . . If divine incarnation has any truth to it, then resurrection is a foregone conclusion and not a one-time anomaly in the body of

Jesus" (pp. 99-100). And, "Resurrection is just incarnation taken to its logical conclusion" (p. 170). He then points to science as a complement to religious faith for understanding this truth. But science can produce no evidence of any individual organism resurrecting like Jesus did. Not one! He gives examples like springtime, regeneration, healing, forgiveness and so forth, but these are not resurrections of the sort that Jesus experienced. They are renewals or re-assimilations, but that's not resurrection. What science teaches as the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics makes clear that all matter eventually dissipates to a more simple form, which is what always happens to the bodies of organisms when they die. Jesus completely escaped this process; his dead body has been restored to a more glorious type of life that transcends death, and this was not predicted by science. Science cannot account for it or explain it. Conflating Jesus' resurrection with natural renewal patterns like springtime minimizes the significance of what happened to him. It was a supernatural event, but Rohr stated earlier in the book that he "can no longer make a significant distinction between the natural and the supernatural" (p. 15). Apparently not.

7. Factual inaccuracies

Some things Rohr just plain old gets wrong, or else he didn't do proper research. On p. 14, he describes neutrinos as "slivers of light that pass through the entire universe." I'm not sure what he's got in mind, here, but that's not what they are.

He writes on p. 171 "if matter is inhabited by God, then matter is somehow eternal." Well, no, it's not. God loves all creatures, but that does not make us eternal. Matter had a beginning in space and time with the Big Bang approximately 13.7 billion years ago. Something that has a beginning cannot be eternal.

In writing about Jesus' glorified body, he says that it is "similar to what Hindus and Buddhists sometimes call the 'subtle body,'" then goes on to refer to halos and auras. (p. 178). Eastern religions do speak of subtle bodies, but these are not conceptually similar to the glorified body of Jesus. They are different levels of energy emanating from a living person. Some of these levels (astral, causal) are thought to continue after death, as Christians believe the spiritual soul does as well; others (e.g., etheric) are thought to dissipate at death. Subtle bodies and souls are not the same as the glorified body of Jesus. Rohr, here, obfuscates the drastic differences.

At the bottom of page 27, he conflates the terms incarnation, salvation, and theosis. They don't mean the same thing.

8. Straw man fallacies

I sometimes wonder what kind of reader Rohr has in mind when he writes, for he sometimes serves up the silliest of straw men in making his points.

Chapter 1, for example, is entitled, "Christ is not Jesus' Last Name." (No kidding?)

"God is not an old man on a throne (p. 28)." (Thanks for clarifying.)

Even the subtitle of the book: "How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe" (Forgotten? By whom?)

The "Great Comma" is part 2 of the book, and refers to the comma that separates the phrases "born of the Virgin Mary" and "suffered under Pontius Pilate" in the Apostles Creed. Rohr wonders why the Creed omits "everything Jesus said and did between his birth and death . . . Did all the things Jesus said and did in those years not count for much?" (pp 103-104). He continues the criticism: that it lacks mention of morality, service, suffering, love, etc. The straw man, here, is that the Apostles Creed ought to be something other than what it is — a brief statement of early Christian beliefs about God and Christ used in liturgy and catechesis, just like today. We might as well fault the Lord's Prayer for saying nothing about the Holy Spirit; how silly would that be? For Rohr, the supposed omissions connote something sinister, an "imperial Christ who lives inside the world of static and mythic proclamations" (p. 105). I don't know what part of the Creed gives that impression; it can be stated whole-heartedly today with a more dynamic understanding of the universe in mind.

The whole treatment of Hell in Chapter 14 knocks down the notion that a loving God wouldn't undertake positive punishments against people (retributive justice). But Hell might also be regarded as a state of being experienced by those rebellious angels and other creatures (including human) who are completely closed to divine grace. Such a Hell would not be retributive; it would be a natural consequence of shutting God out of one's life. Such a possible Hell cannot be discounted unless one believes that God will over-ride free will to prevent it from happening. Jesus taught about the possibility of Hell, and none of us can claim to know more about this matter than him.

Summary

On page 23, Rohr asks the reader to “trust your Christian common sense,” and that is what informs my critique of "The Universal Christ." I know the book is quite popular — a #1 Bestseller on Amazon. Rohr is a very popular Christian writer, and what he’s attempting to articulate in this book is nothing short of an updated understanding of Christ and the Christian mysteries. It will influence many, as, indeed, it has with the people I companion in spiritual direction. My sense is that the central themes of the book deviate too significantly from orthodox teachings to shed new light on such. A concern I have is whether readers of this book have the educational background to sort things out. He uses Scripture throughout to back up his teaching, but he often misinterprets the texts or spins them to support the meaning he’s expressing. As one of my spiritual companions recently told me, “sometimes he says things that don’t feel right, but I’m not sure why." Perhaps this critique will help people like him to put words to their reservations.

My sense is that Rohr is trying to build bridges between Buddhism and Christianity, and also wanting to resonate with those many who have been hurt in some way by church teachers or teachings. He’s also seems to be softening Christianity’s claim that Jesus is the exclusive incarnation of God; inclusivity is a very, very big theme in this book. These are all worthy considerations, but there’s only so far you can go without compromising a religion's core beliefs and values. Whether or not Rohr has done so will be for the reader to decide.

April 25, 2019

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* Page numbers from 1st ed. hardback by Convergent Books, 2018.