

THE COSMIC CHRIST

By Fr. Ronald Rolheiser

Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was once called to Rome and asked to clarify certain issues in regards to his teachings. At one point, he was asked: "What are you trying to do?" His answer, in effect: "I am trying to write a Christology that is wide enough to incorporate Christ. Christ isn't just an anthropological phenomenon with significance for humanity, but Christ is also a cosmic event with significance for the planet."

Scripture agrees. Christ is more than just an historical person who walked this earth for 33 years, though he is that. He is more than a great teacher, marvelous miracle-worker, and extraordinary moral-exemplar, though he is that too. Indeed Christ is even more than the God-man who died for our sins and rose from the dead, though that is a crucial part of his identity. Christ, the scriptures tell us, is also someone and something within the very structure of the cosmos itself, the pattern on which the universe was conceived, is built, and is now developing.

As the letter to the Colossians puts it: "*Christ is the firstborn of all creation (physical and spiritual); for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created ... all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together.*"

This concept challenges the imagination, implying far, far more than we normally dare think. Among other things, it tells us that Christ lies not just at the root of spirituality and morality, but at the base of physics, biology, chemistry, and cosmology as well. This has many implications:

First of all, it means that the spiritual and the material, the moral and the physical, the mystical and the hormonal, and the religious and the pagan do not oppose each other but are part of one thing, one pattern, all infused by one and the same spirit, all drawn to the same end, with the same goodness and meaning. Simply put, the same force is responsible both for the law of gravity and the Sermon on the Mount and both are binding for the same reason.

All reality, be it spiritual, physical, moral, mathematical, mystical, or hormonal is made and shaped according to the one, same pattern and everything (be it the universe itself hurdling through space, the blind attraction of atoms for each other, the relentless push for growth in a plant, the instinctual hunt for blood by a mosquito, the automatic impulse to put everything into his mouth by a baby, the erotic charge inside the body of an adolescent, the fierce protectiveness of a young mother, the obsession to create inside an artist, or the genuflection in prayer or altruism of a saint) is ultimately part of one and the same thing, the unfolding of creation as made in the image of Christ and as revealing the invisible God.

The fact that Christ is cosmic and that nature is shaped in his likeness means too that God's face is manifest everywhere. If physical creation is patterned on Christ, then we must search for God not just in our scriptures, in our saints, and in our churches, though these shape the boundless nature and energies of God into principles and dogmas in a way that allows us to somehow appropriate them as trustworthy and normative. However if Christ is also the pattern according to which the universe itself is unfolding, then what's good and what's inside of God is also somehow manifest in the raw energy, color, and beauty of the physical, be that the beauty of sunset or a symphony, which we can more easily acknowledge as religious, or be it the more morally ambivalent, but undeniable, beauty that is manifest in the body of a movie star, the voice of a pop singer, or the colorful and lively sexual energy that bubbles inside the culture. Clear or ambivalent, everything reflects the same pattern.

Finally, if Christ is the structure for the cosmic universe itself, the question of the normativeness of Christ for salvation ("*There is no way to salvation, except through Christ.*") poses itself differently. The famous, early Christian hymn in Ephesians speaks of "*a plan to be carried out in the fullness of time to bring all things into one, in Christ.*" What's implied here, among other things, is that Christ is bigger than the historical churches, operates beyond the scope of historical Christianity (although admittedly he does operate within it), and has influences prior and beyond human history itself. It is Christ, visible and invisible - the person, the spirit, the power, and the mystery - who is drawing all things, physical and spiritual, natural and religious, non-Christian and Christian, into one. As Kenneth Cragg puts it: "*It will take all the religions of the world to give full expression to the whole Christ.*"

Teilhard was right. We need a Christology wide enough to incorporate the whole Christ and our imaginations need still to be stretched.

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