

# I HAVE CALLED YOU FRIENDS

JOHN 15:15

A Reflection on Understandings of Jesus  
Among Members of the Religious Society of Friends

By Daniel A. Seeger

Offered as a Contribution to the  
Monday Evening Lecture Series (Spring 1992)  
Pendle Hill  
Wallingford, Pennsylvania

May 25, 1992  
(*Short Version*)

The meeting to which I belong back in New York City, Fifteenth Street Monthly Meeting in Manhattan, holds two meetings for worship on First Day mornings. The first meeting at 9:30 a.m. is for those with early-bird inclinations and for people who prefer a smaller gathering with more silence. The 11:00 a.m. meeting is the "big" meeting, at which an animated throng of about 150 people usually gather, and in which, during worship, the Spirit can usually be counted upon to inspire an abundance of vocal ministry, often of a fairly venturesome sort.

For all the years I have been a member of this meeting, I have been a faithful attender of the 9:30 a.m. gathering for worship. One First Day morning last spring, while going to meeting for worship, I was sitting on a bench at the DeKalb Avenue subway stop in Brooklyn, close to where I used to live, waiting for the next train to take me to Manhattan. The one good thing about subway travel which does not characterize the suburban automobile culture to which I am now acclimating myself is that subway travel affords you some time to read. As I was sitting waiting for the train I was immersed in Matthew Fox's book, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*.

As I was reading, in my absorption, I scarcely noticed the person who had sat down on the bench next to me. Yet somehow, subconsciously, I became aware that someone else was reading my book also, and so when it came time to turn the page, I looked sideways as if to see if it was alright to do so. I found myself looking at a young woman who quickly said, "What does that mean--Cosmic Christ?" Her question was stated not in a tentative or inquisitive way, but with a slightly skeptical and assertive tone.

At that point in my reading I was, myself, beginning to get fatigued with what seemed like Father Fox's boundless enthusiasm for every New Age trend which came into his view, and so at that moment I scarcely felt qualified to try

to interpret his concept in a summary fashion to an inquiring stranger. So I said that I was not quite sure, that I had not yet finished the book. But I then went on to try to describe the idea of the Christ-Spirit permeating everything in the universe, and leading everything to a just and harmonious Second Coming.

My new acquaintance looked very doubtful, and asserted that the Bible might be a better place to read about Jesus. She then explained at some length the fallen nature of the world and the power of the Devil, and said that it was unlikely that there will be any place for Christ here until we clean up our act, so to speak.

I allowed that the power of Satan might indeed be great, but that our own attention is the substance of God, and by giving too much of our attention to the power of evil, to be preoccupied too much with the work of the Devil, puts us in danger of giving it additional force and power.

My brief comments sounded a little lame in contrast to her fairly lengthy ones, and being anxious to get the subject off theology, I asked her if she was on her way to church also. She said no, that she was going to work, that actually the sabbath was on Saturday, the seventh day, when the Lord said that we should rest. She gave a fairly long explanation of how this was so, and of the importance of human beings not setting up their own schedule of observance in counter-distinction to what God had commanded. She then let me know that she had been to church the previous day.

I said that I hoped that the deity would find all people's worship acceptable, even if the timing was a little bit off.

The young woman was by no means a run-on religious fanatic, but I did find myself wondering when the train would come. She asked me what church I was going to, and when I told her, she asked if she might attend sometime herself. I casually said that, of course, she would be welcome, but then was a little startled when she rummaged in her purse for a paper and pencil so that I might write down the details for her.

I took the pen and paper and hesitated. I was uncertain how our efforts to tease mysteries out of the silence might mesh with her many words of certitude. I must admit that the idea of writing down a false address occurred to me; I am happy to be able to report that I quickly decided not to indulge in so flagrant a violation of the Friends testimony on veracity. I wrote down the

correct address of the meetinghouse, and was about to write "Worship: 11 a.m. on Sunday", thinking at least to protect my favored early-bird worship, but after a brief hesitation finally wrote, "Worship: 9:30 a.m. and 11:00 on Sundays."

I tell this little anecdote at the beginning of this reflection because it seems to contain all the elements with which we have been concerned in this lecture series. The incident illustrates an abiding interest in Jesus--an interest shared by theological adventurers like Matthew Fox, by silence-oriented non-creedal Friends like myself, and by persons of an athletic Christian certitude, such as the young woman whom I met. The discussion of the Sabbath illustrates how different people get different messages from the same scriptures. Moreover, the woman's forceful assertions, and my temptation to avoid the prospect of having to deal with her at Fifteenth Street Meeting, also seem to illustrate the dynamics which have become typical of many faith communities.

Our conversation's focus on the issue of the Sabbath illustrates some of the quandaries we face. Jesus seemed to run afoul of the religious authorities of his own day on a number of occasions over the issue of Sabbath observance. In fact, to the extent that we accept the concept that Jesus, while in the process of fulfilling the Law, was also radically changing it, his altercation with the religious officials of his time over the Sabbath seem to symbolize the distinction between his way and that of a legalistic sort of piety. Nevertheless, deeply sincere and committed Christians have found many excuses to quarrel legalistically with each other over Sabbath observance.

In 1973 Biblical scholars convened at Cambridge University to conduct an exhaustive exegetical and theological exploration of the Sabbath which resulted in a massive volume of studies about the implications of the change from Sabbath-day, or seventh day, observance to Sunday, or Lord's Day observance, and to Jesus' apparent exertion of God-like authority over Jewish Sabbath commandments. While many people can deduce arguments for *seventh day* Sabbath observance, others can advance similarly powerful arguments in favor of *first day* Lord's Day observance, and still others can favor the abolition of such observances altogether--all operating from favorite scriptural texts! Whatever our own individual attitudes might be about scripture, the one thing that seems empirically demonstrable beyond any shadow of a doubt is that, regarding many important issues, scriptural texts seem to say quite different things to different people.

Indeed, all the same difficulties presented by the question of Sabbath day observance, particularly all of the difficulties of scriptural interpretation, and all the consequent tensions within the church, exist as well regarding one of the central matters of Christian faith: Who was Jesus, what was his nature, and what is the significance of his life and ministry for contemporary people?

When I agreed to undertake this final lecture upon the invitation of the Extension Program many months ago none of us knew exactly what the preceding speakers would say. We undertook this lecture series as part of an overall goal of serving the Religious Society of Friends by making available a place where deep sharing and prayerful listening can occur on issues which trouble the unity of our Quaker community. Certainly, as those of us who attended the Realignment Lecture series last fall are well aware, and as I certainly am aware from having travelled among the various branches of our Religious Society, attitudes about Jesus present one of the most difficult matters which trouble Friends' sense of concord with each other. I would have expected that by this time in the lecture series we would have had presented some sharply-etched perspectives on the question of how Friends ought to view Jesus of Nazareth, and that I might conclude by offering some thoughts about how, given this spectrum of views, Friends' continued association in a community of worship, of dialogue and of service, was in good ordering and might be viewed as an expression of the divine creative plan.

But, as the time for preparing for this evening came around, I became aware that while we have heard a very fascinating series of lectures, they seem only indirectly to have touched upon those issues that divide Friends. We have had presented some riveting accounts about advances in feminist theological thought and in liberationist theological thought, and some deeply meaningful reflections on Jesus' continuing presence among us, but neither feminist interpretations of the Gospel, nor liberation theology, nor the idea of the continuing presence of the Christ spirit, are apt to divide Friends sharply from each other. In fact, by focussing on these exciting theological frontiers and traditional areas of common devotion our speakers may have rendered a better and more valuable service than we had anticipated, for they have disclosed the vast areas of study where Friends from many different traditions might anticipate rewarding explorations together.

Yet we must also recognize that Friends' sense of community with each other is apt to become strained, not over the issues we have heard about in this series of lectures, but over Friends' differing perspectives on the matter of the humanity and divinity of Jesus.

Obviously, all gradations of opinion exist within our small Religious Society of Friends about this issue. At one end of this spectrum of opinion are those Friends who believe that a person who walked the earth in Galilee two thousand years ago, one Jesus of Nazareth, is the unique and only Son of God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father, the person through whom all other things from the beginning of time were made. (I have deliberately employed the non-inclusive language of the Nicene Creed, the ancient and original official formulation of this doctrine).

In other words, it is believed that an obscure Jewish teacher who lived about two thousand years ago at the fringes of what was then thought of as the civilized world was actually co-creator and co-ruler of all the stars and galaxies in the cosmos. Moreover, in Jesus the one thing happened that needed to happen to reconcile this universe to its God. Through his office a new and permanent relationship has been established between God and the entire human race--an office which need never be exercised again in the same way. People who believe in this unique and extraordinary celestial origin of Jesus and in his special mission of atonement also accept that at the same time he was deeply and fully human.

Some Friends are dismayed that others cannot accept all this as the most fundamental basis of their faith; other Friends, in contrast, are equally baffled to find that anyone can take such a collection of ideas, with its mixture of grandiosity and incomprehensibility, seriously. Such Friends may either doubt that Jesus ever really existed, or will acknowledge only that, if he did exist, he was probably an extraordinary spiritual teacher who deserves our attention and respect much on a par with other great spiritual teachers. Some Friends are even unwilling to call themselves Christians.

It is useful to reflect that the earliest days of the Christian movement were characterized by great diversity. Many alternative versions of Christianity which flourished in the period immediately following the apostolic age subsequently disappeared from view. Some would say that they were ruthlessly stamped out. But given the diversity that once existed, members of the earliest Christian communities might have been quite surprised if it had been suggested that there was only one right way to think about, to feel about, and to experience their faith, and only one way to understand the exact relationship of their faith to Jesus. But eventually the set of ideas I quoted earlier were made official at a Church Council held in Nicaea. This council was held in the year 325 C.E., and was convened, and apparently presided over, by the Roman Emperor Constantine.

The idea that concourse between human beings and deities could result in offspring, so foreign to Jewish sensibility, was a commonplace notion in Hellenistic culture, the pantheon of which was populated with many god-men and god-women. Constantine himself had deified his own father, and might have been expecting to be deified himself one day. But he apparently converted to Christianity, although some doubt the sincerity of this conversion and the depth of his grasp of the ministry of Jesus. At any rate, seeking to consolidate a crumbling Empire by unifying and coopting one of the most vital movements within it, the Christian movement, Constantine presided over the hammering out of the Nicene formula, which was reaffirmed in final form at a Council held at Chalcedon in 351 C.E.

Friends, from the beginning of our Religious Society, have sought to recreate and to re-experience the Christianity of the apostolic age. Friends have spoken of practicing primitive Christianity revived. Perhaps we should not be surprised that in seeking to revive primitive Christianity--pre-Constantinian Christianity--we have revived as well some of the diversity that characterized the very earliest days of the Church. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that this diverse spectrum of views cohabits only very uneasily within our contemporary Religious Society of Friends.

For example, I have been at a meeting of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group where one of the resource persons proposed that Friends who did not accept the divinity of the historic Jesus of Nazareth ought to be categorized as only associate members of the Religious Society of Friends. Again, at the Conference on Realignment I attended last October, the thought that there were people being admitted into some parts of the Religious Society of Friends who did not accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior was very distressing to many in attendance.

At the same time, as a committee member of the Friends World Committee for Consultation, which seeks to draw together people from all branches of the Society of Friends, I found it was not uncommon, when we tried to develop a leaflet or brochure interpreting Friends to seekers or to people of other faiths, that we had complaints from certain Quakers if we employed traditional Christian vocabulary in describing the beliefs and testimonies of our Religious Society. Most of these complaining Friends are probably refugees from Christian malpractice experienced in other denominations, and so their feelings might be quite understandable. Nevertheless, it does make for difficulty to try to satisfy their desire to describe our spiritual community without resorting to any of the words the western world has

traditionally used for speaking about spiritual experience.

In any event, Friends espousing a traditional Christian theology, as well as Friends seeking to escape from it, are each apt to promote their views aggressively within Quakerism, which can leave Friends who feel they hold more nuanced positions feeling somewhat cowed.

I would like to step back for a moment from the matters of the trinity and the incarnation, that is, from the matter of the combined humanity and divinity of Jesus, and reflect for a moment about the nature of spiritual truth itself. How is spiritual truth the same as, or different from, everyday household truth, if you will?

All sanctity is born of conflict--of contradictions resolved, finally, into union. For the landscape of humankind's spiritual world, the world in which we realize our most noble accomplishments and in which we suffer our most crushing defeats, is a landscape of intellectually unresolvable dichotomies. Freedom versus order; self-help salvation versus grace, or even predestination; tradition and innovation; the simultaneous fallenness and exaltedness of human nature; stability and change; justice versus mercy. (Saint Thomas Aquinas observed that justice without mercy is cruelty, while mercy without justice is the mother of dissolution). In his many wonderful paintings entitled *The Peaceable Kingdom* the Quaker artist Edward Hicks charmingly symbolizes for us an ideal of sanctity which involves the reconciliation of such opposites. The logical mind is offended by these dichotomies and seeks to come down on one side or the other of them; the same dichotomies provoke and stimulate the higher human faculties, the faculties without which human beings are nothing but very clever animals. People of great sanctity somehow transcend these dichotomies without abandoning the truth on each side of them.

Humankind's particular vocation, then, is a precarious balancing act. It is a vocation that can be carried out successfully only with wisdom and love. It is a vocation which cannot be guided by simple, dogmatic assertions, which by their nature tend simply to prefer one side or the other of these dichotomies. The gospels have in common with the techniques of Socrates and of Zen Masters the fact that they question us, rather than telling us things. Legalism, lawyerliness and literalism are the enemies of all true spirituality. Poetry and parable are its friends. When spiritual discourse is reduced to lawyer-like debates, everyone loses.

It is interesting that Jesus never claimed to be a philosopher or an



analyst. Indeed, very few of his sermons, as they are passed down to us in the gospels, could even be said to follow an outline. It is hard to imagine these sermons being spoken without long intervals of silence interspersed. Often Jesus spoke in somewhat obscure anecdotes and parables. On several occasions he simply said, "I *am* the Truth." He did not say I have come to give you great ideas or penetrating philosophies. He simply said, "I *am* the Truth." One of these occasions occurred during an interview with Pontius Pilate. Pilate's response to this strange assertion was to ask the question, "And what is Truth?" In asking the question this way, Pilate was, perhaps, revealing his background in Hellenistic culture, with its penchant for philosophizing. And as if to indicate that there was little possibility for rapprochement between one who claimed to "be" the Truth and another ready to dispute about it, Pilate, without waiting for any response from Jesus, turned away, and, ultimately, washed his hands of the entire matter which ensued.

There is a wisdom which is from the Lord, created from eternity in the beginning, and remaining until eternity at the end. It is a wisdom which we are told the Lord has poured out on all his works to be with humankind forever as his gift. (Jerusalem Bible--Ecclesiasticus 1:9,10) But this eternal wisdom is not something we can know with our minds only. Rather, it is something we are, it is a quality of being. Our minds cannot contain what contains us nor comprehend what comprehends us. We can enact this Truth, but we cannot adequately articulate it. Those who have a grasp of this are very wary of debates about spiritual matters. They know that the Truth is to be lived, not merely to be pronounced by the mouth, and they know that by their so living, that which is unutterable will be rendered visible.

This concept of spiritual Truth as something which can be enacted but not fully explained, as something which requires a grasp of reality in a way not fully comprehensible to the rational mind, offers a contrast to the suppositions underlying our own American culture.

We are children of the political and philosophical movement known as the Enlightenment. As the interwoven religious and political world of medieval times collapsed, the view arose that a new human culture could be built on reason. The commercial and industrial revolutions, the growth of scientific method and engineering, and advances in philosophical thought all held out the hope that henceforth human life would be characterized by an inexorable, rationally determined march of progress toward truth and freedom.

Yet now, several hundred years later, I believe most sensitive people

recognize that this Enlightenment vision is on the brink of collapse. An ecological disaster looms if a modern industrial way of life is extended to all who aspire to it; there seems to be no rational way to govern a modern economy, as both the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the present state of the American economy attest; tribal conflicts in Europe and in many other parts of the world, which from a distance appear to be the antithesis of sweet reason, seem destined to drown many in a sea of blood; debate about important moral issues in American life, such as about abortion, seem to defy the expectation that reasonable and fair-minded people, after a period of respectful discussion, will come to a meeting of minds, as we look forward to what seems like an interminable period of shrill debate. Any of us could catalog many more symptoms of the collapse of Enlightenment hopes.

It is a misconception of the modern age to believe that one who knows how to think rationally will know how to live. But in reality life is not actually experienced as a kind of debate among member faculties of the soul in which the most persuasive wins the argument. The rationalist affirms that, "I think, therefore I am." The spiritually aware person asks something deeper: "I am *what?*" As human beings, both individually and collectively, we are subjects seeking a predicate. But reason cannot supply the definition of our essential nature, of our ultimate purpose as human beings. This answer can only be supplied by a kind of intuitive certitude, a certitude we know as faith. The answer our faith supplies is extremely important. Mohandas K. Gandhi observed that people tend to become what they think they are. Clearly, the conception of human nature that we carry about with us in our minds and hearts is no inconsequential matter!

The mysterious, miraculous ministry of Jesus somehow offers us an answer to this great question: "What are we?" The movement he started, like other great religions, tells us what we are meant to be as human beings, offers us explanations of human existence, and outlines for us ways to live which are expressive of such meanings. Religions like Christianity do this not only for individuals, but aspire to orient whole cultures, and often succeed in doing so. They are comprehensive ways of life and thought. A complex and interrelated series of values, habits and practices flows out of and gives expression to a total vision of human life which is aspired to, respected and admired--a vision of life which elicits spiritual enthusiasm.

In contrast to the approach of classical religious movements, the official cultural philosophy of the United States, or should we say the official state religion, posits that we are all separate and independent beings, free

individuals set loose on this spaceship Earth to pursue our own wants and needs, and to invent our own individual philosophies of life, with the single proviso that we do not inhibit in any way a similar pursuit of their personal wants and needs by other members of the community. But is this idea of individualism really plausible? Is there anything we could possibly want that does not in some way inhibit and constrain others in the community? Is there any move we can make, or any desire we might have, which does not, if it is realized, change the lives of others in some way?

And is it possible that two hundred million people, all of whom in their daily lives becomes ever more practiced in pursuing strictly private needs will, when the big issues come along, like saving the Earth for future generations, have the capacity to make, in the aggregate, the best decision in the interests of the common good?

However we may regard the career of Jesus of Nazareth, he stood for a different approach. For his death on the cross is a paradigm for a way of life which puts the good of everyone, past, present, and future, ahead of an individual's wishes.

Each of us may not be called upon to die on a cross, but every day we face the need to re-educate our desires, in everything we do, both small and large, so as to put the well-being of others first. This is the daily cross; there clearly is no future for humankind unless more and more people are willing to assume this daily cross. Jesus can show us the way, but it is we who must choose; it is we who must read the signs of our times and live and act in a fully human way.

And as Jesus read the signs of his times, we must read the signs of ours. We cannot blindly mimic Jesus. These are different times; the impending catastrophe is unlike anything that has come before. Each epoch of human history occupies a unique place in the unfolding drama of the Creation and is given a special role to play. We, men and women inhabiting North Atlantic civilization in the late Twentieth Century, face such a distinct historical task, as have the ages that have come before us.

In these times we face the collapse of a civilization built exclusively on rationalism, and we have the task of listening for leadings that will take us beyond this collapse, that will lay the basis for the next stage of civilization. But there is another dimension to all this. The new spirituality which will provide a basis for the future must be a global spirituality. Clearly, if we are

ever to cultivate that minimum degree of world fellowship necessary for humankind to survive, it must be done on a religious basis. From no other source but from religious faith will whole populations muster the energy, devotion, vision, resolution and capacity to survive disappointment and to persist in struggle that will be necessary for the eventual development of a global community. Thus, the great spiritual traditions of humankind must work together to heal the human family; these great spiritual traditions must not become another occasion of strife and contention.

In the face of this collapse of modern rationalist culture and in the face of a desperate need for a spiritually based global community we are confronted with Christian fundamentalists who seek to address these needs with a religious sensibility brought forward from centuries ago, the main premises of which are scriptural inerrancy and the Constantinian formula regarding the identity of Jesus. And as we know, the Constantinian formula is the basis for the ages old Christian concept that the Christian faith is a unique, superior and final revelation of God's will for humankind, and that anyone seeking salvation must become a Christian. Yet it is necessary to state that one cannot plumb the depth of humankind's spiritual needs at this juncture of history, nor develop the capacity to address these needs profoundly, on the basis of a philosophy that one of the several great spiritual traditions and spiritual cultures which have evolved during humankind's long pilgrimage on earth, namely Christianity, is meant simply to swallow up all the others.

The historical task that Quakers and other people of Christian faith must face is one of shedding outmoded dogmatic encumbrances, and of joining with people of non-Christian faiths in the projection of a spiritual vision which will sustain humankind's future. There is much in Friends' tradition which qualifies us to contribute to this great task. Are we ready to undertake it?

Must the suggestion that there are other saviours beside Jesus, and that there is the possibility of salvation in other religious communities beside Christianity, sound outrageous and blasphemous to Christian ears? Is there not a significant strand of insight in the New Testament, brought into view mainly in the Johannine and Pauline texts, indicating that the *Sophia* and the *Logos* represent the universal presence of the Word in all of human history? Might this account for the existence of such sublime teachings as are contained in the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Dhammapada*? Is it possible that New Testament theology allows for the recognition that other religions can provide positive means for people to gain a right relationship with God, and that indeed they might be part of God's universal plan of salvation? Would not

most Christians now in an uneasy and lukewarm relationship with their church come to feel better and more honest about their faith if this truth could be openly acknowledged?

Some theologians insist that there are no scriptural passages which support the Nicene/Constantinian formulation. Others acknowledge that a few passages attribute divine characteristics to Jesus, a few passages which claim that he was a totally unique sort of being. But there are relatively few such passages. Of these, the theologian Paul Knitter writes:

All the "one and only" adjectives used to describe Jesus belong "not to the language of philosophy, science, or dogmatics, but rather to the language of confession and testimony." In talking about Jesus, the New Testament authors use the language not of analytic philosophers but of enthusiastic believers, not of scientists but of lovers . . . in describing Jesus as "the only," Christians were not trying to elaborate a metaphysical principle but a personal relationship . . .

Exclusivist Christological language is much like the language a husband would use to a wife (or vice versa): "You are the most beautiful woman in the world . . . You are the only woman for me." Such statements, in the context of the marital relationship and especially in intimate moments, are certainly true. But the husband would balk if asked to take an oath that there is absolutely no other woman in the world as beautiful as his wife or no other woman he could possibly love and marry. It would be transforming love language into scientific or philosophical language. Christian dogmatic definitions, in the way they have been understood and used, have perhaps done just that to the love language of the early church. The languages of the heart and the head are not necessarily contradictory, but they are different. And their differences must be respected. (Paul Knitter is Professor of Theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati. He received his doctorate at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome).

The gospels give us very few clues about how Jesus understood himself. Jesus seems not to have had a Christology. He seems himself never to have claimed to be a Messiah or a God. Jesus apparently proclaimed the Kingdom of God, or, in gender neutral vocabulary, the Realm of God. His followers, the authors of the gospels and the other books of the New Testament, proclaimed

Jesus. Even in the three texts in which Jesus is proclaimed as divine (John 1:1, John 20:28, and Hebrews 1:8-9) there is an evident subordination to God. Jesus most often calls himself the Child of Humanity (Son of Man). Linguists still argue about the significance of this phrase in the usage of New Testament times.

Theologian Norman Perrin of the University of Chicago Divinity School writes:

It is a striking feature of modern historical research that there is general agreement that the Messianic claims put on the lips of Jesus in the gospels are exactly that: claims *put* on the lips of Jesus in the gospels. So far as we can tell, Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom (sic) of God but made no explicit claims for himself. Of course, the very fact that he proclaimed the Kingdom of God and challenged his hearers as he did no doubt *implied* claims about himself, but no such claims were ever made explicit. The explicit claims in the gospel reflect the piety and understanding of the early church, not historical data about Jesus of Nazareth . . . We do know . . . that within a short time after his death the followers of Jesus were claiming that God has raised him from the dead. Where he himself had proclaimed the Kingdom of God, they began to proclaim him. The proclaimer became the proclaimed.

Can we ever know for sure what Jesus was really like? What is agreed to is that surviving scriptural writings, whatever their merits for revealing spiritual truth may be, are completely inadequate as a source for historical data. They account for little more than a few weeks in Jesus' life. When one reads the gospels sequentially, one is mainly aware of common themes; however, if one reads them side by side, comparing accounts of the same incidents or the same teachings, one is more struck by contradictions and disagreements than by similarity. We know how difficult it is to uncover the true personality of people like John Kennedy, Harry Truman or Richard Nixon, even though there are mountains of data and it is all much closer at hand. How then can we know the true nature of Jesus? Alas, it would be too much of a digression here to get into the fascinating story of various attempts to reconstruct the historical Jesus.

But what we can probably affirm with safety and conviction is that Jesus seemed to feel and to claim a special intimacy with God. He felt himself to be so close to, and so familiar with, the love and the energy which guides the

universe, so imbued with its spirit, that he could address it as mother or father. Moreover, when in Jesus' presence and when listening to his teaching, others, too, sensed their own intimacy with God. They became powerfully aware of the presence of God when in the presence of Jesus. Have we all not had similar experiences? A person, or a situation, or a place makes the presence of God palpable to us? Perhaps we can forgive people in an ancient times for their failure to make neat, analytical distinctions between God, the sense of God's presence, and the one who seemed unfailingly to make God's presence felt in a situation. Indeed, perhaps we can recognize that such an analysis is itself an artifice.

Yet even though Jesus brought many people into a new connection with the divine origin of all things, many others were unable to hear or to respond to his message. Moreover, the evidence seems quite clear that even his most convinced and loyal followers had difficulty actually understanding Jesus. We are told that Jesus himself was impatient with them and frequently driven to despair over their failure to grasp his message. Despite his instructions, his close followers could not always remember his teachings accurately or coherently. Partly this is because they were not trained philosophers or orators; in fact they were not educated people at all. But even more important, the teaching Jesus had to give was itself intrinsically difficult both to understand and to convey. We must dismiss any idea that Jesus was a simple figure. His actions and motives were complex, and he taught something which was elusive and hard to grasp. Jesus had new insights to deliver, or at least, startlingly refreshing interpretations of old insights. But he apparently sought to present this as a fulfillment of the old order. He also sought to include outcast elements in his mission, but seemed also anxious to carry the orthodox along with him. He was a true universalist.

Given all these difficulties, what we have in the gospels regarding the teachings of Jesus is more a series of glimpses than a clear code of doctrine. There is certainly no simple set of handy rules that can be unreflectively applied in daily life. Jesus started a spiritual movement based on dialogue, exploration and experiment, a movement which invites comment, interpretation, and elaboration in a spiritual quest. The radical elements in his teachings are balanced by conservative qualifications. There seems to be a constant mixture of legalism and antinomianism; there is an emphasis which repeatedly switches from rigor and militancy to acquiescence and the acceptance of suffering. Some of this variety reflects the genuine bewilderment of the disciples and the confusion of the evangelical editors to whom their memories descended, but some of it undoubtedly truly reflects Jesus' awareness

of the insoluble dichotomies of which we spoke earlier, and thus is essentially a part of his universalist posture. As Paul Johnson observes in *A History of Christianity*, "the wonder of all this is that the personality behind the mission is in no way fragmented but is always integrated and true to character. Jesus contrives to be all things to all people while remaining faithful to himself."

According to the Gospel stories, Jesus never once described a saved person as one who believed in doctrines A, B, C, or D. In fact, in the ninth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus, when speaking to the Pharisees, seems to imply that those who claim Truth as a possession are apt to become as blind people. At another time he is reported to have said that his followers would be known by one thing only, by the way they love one another. He also said that he himself had come so that "all may be one." Thus, the godliness which Jesus embodied was concerned not with *orthodoxy*, with right belief or right doctrine, but with *orthopraxis*, with right practice or right living. It was a godliness which was humane and compassionate. Indeed, in an odd and mysterious paradox, the godliness of Jesus was realized by his living in a fully human way, by his being the ultimate human, the perfect human being.

Our consideration of the relative humanity or divinity of Jesus brings us back once again to all the insoluble dichotomies I described earlier as innate to humankind's spiritual quest. To come down too hard on one side or the other of this question of humanity and divinity is to miss the point. Relentlessly to deify Jesus distances him from us and robs him of his true greatness. After all, if Jesus knew he was divine and would rise in glory on the third day to sit at the right hand of the Father, we reduce the crucifixion to a kind of inconvenient surgery. Similarly, if the reason why the Sermon on the Mount speaks to us is because of its "extra-terrestrial origins," because it is backed up by a threat of other worldly retribution, one might as well not bother with it at all. Unless Jesus' words resonate with something very deep in one's own being with which they have a profound and mysterious kinship, all is lost. On the other hand, to declare Jesus to be merely another "prophet like Jefferson" is to rob the experience he represents of much of its saving power, and to diminish our own divine potential as well. Jesus was a child of God; we are all in some sense children of God. Jesus was human; we are all human. Jesus was divine; we are all in some sense divine. That Jesus was a person who still can reveal to us how God is seems to be beyond all doubt. That there are other sources of revelation also seems beyond doubt. Arguing about which revelation is more perfect or more or less normative is futile. In the face of such debate, a sensitive person always senses true godliness withdrawing.



Every person has some sort of god in her or his life. We have seen many of these gods in modern times--money, power, prestige, some aspect of one's passions or emotions, some political or social ideology. Whatever god one is somehow drawn to gives form and shape to one's life, for better or for worse. To place Jesus and what he stood for at the center of our beings and to exist in accordance with the way, the truth and the life which he embodied is to acknowledge his divinity for us.

If spiritual truth is a quality of being, rather than something that we mere know with our minds, Christianity, in common with all the world's faiths, offers a true path of transformation for our being, a path to a metanoia, to a new self in which our joy becomes complete, a metanoia based on a seed already within us, a seed which is pure, perfect and complete, a seed which corresponds to the highest levels of Truth in the Creation.

The potential of this transformation is infinite in extent. To the degree that we are in a condition to recognize the wisdom, love, and service of those who have manifested the larger possibilities of this transformation we call them saints. Those whose realization of this divine potential seems complete, we see as incarnations of God, or avatars. It is true that the perfect human being, the fully realized or enlightened one, is divine.

Paul Knitter writes:

As we deepen our awareness of what we may have encountered in our faith experience, as we search after the hidden face of God, we realize that every discovery, every insight, must be corrected and balanced by its opposite. As we discover the personality of God, we realize that God is beyond personality. As we penetrate into the immanence of divinity, we become aware of its transcendence. As we awaken to the "already" of God's kingdom in this world, we become more conscious of its "not-yet." Every belief, every doctrinal claim, must therefore be clarified and corrected by beliefs that, at first sight, claim the contrary. Realizing all this, we are disposed to look on different religions, with their "contrary" experiences and beliefs, not as adversaries but as potential partners.

In the mundane world of ordinary affairs, the opposite of the truth is a falsehood. But in the sphere of religion, the opposite of a great spiritual truth is often not a lie (although sometimes it is), but often it is another great

spiritual truth.

Jesus called us his friends. Let us pray that as friends of Jesus we can support within the Christian community the development of a Jesus-faith which permits us to think optimistically about the possibility of salvation in all the world's great spiritual traditions. Let the first concern of the friends of Jesus be to cooperate with and to encourage, rather than to convert, anyone who is already promoting the Realm of God on earth. Let us look forward to the day when all humankind's great religions will collaborate full-heartedly in a mutual building up of a civilization based on love. Let us recognize that while spiritual life in its externals often presents us with a bewildering diversity, the saints of each tradition are practically indistinguishable from each other in their lives, in their way of being. Their theological concepts may be different; their feelings and their conduct are amazingly similar. They dwell in love, and God dwells in them because God is love. Increasingly, in this modern age, the capacity to apprehend the One in the many constitutes the special responsibility of those who would dwell in love. May this capacity to apprehend the One in the many and the love it expresses, be the special gift of the friends of Jesus to people of faith everywhere!