



Christ as Archetype

– A Transpersonal Psychology Perspective

Chris Scott

I want to start this article by stating that what I have to say is both provisional and contextually limited. It is provisional because it has to do with my own spiritual and psychological processes, and these are constantly in a state of flux. I am offering these suggestions as a way forward for Christianity, and as a link with Transpersonal Psychology, not because I think they will meet everybody's needs, or even be welcome by a good many people, but because it reflects something of my journey. If what I say has any resonance with you the reader, helps in any way to make sense of the Christian story in the 21st century, then I am happy that this is the case. If, on the other hand, it has no resonance, if it helps neither those who are Christian nor those who come from a more 'secular' psychological perspective, then it should simply be disregarded. As both a priest and a psychologist I struggle with models and metaphors to help give meaning to and make sense out of my life. I am not trying to espouse some new doctrine to be written in stone, heaven forbid, both theology and psychology have more than enough of those already. My criteria is simple and utilitarian, if it is useful us it, if not, discard it.

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The contextual limitation comes from the fact that I am who I am living in the south of England at this point in history. I am speaking to my own condition as a man who lives in a technologically advanced society with access to almost unlimited amounts of information and knowledge. Certainly, in what remains of my life, I will not be able to even scratch the

surface of what is available to me. I fully realise that what I am proposing will not suit other cultures, or people in our own culture of a disposition different to my own.

Carl Jung, he said this: 'Eternal truth needs a human language that alters with the spirit of the times.' What does this imply? Not that the truth alters, but the means of communicating the truth needs to reflect the understanding of the society it is presented to. This, I believe, is where the church today utterly fails. It continues to use a language form – albeit in modern English – that would not seem out of place to the medieval mind. It insists that doctrines that were formulated sixteen or seventeen hundred years ago, be held onto as if they were the truth, instead of an expression of the truth that was culturally and historically limited.

I know for a fact, from speaking to individuals, and from running groups, that very many long-term committed Christians find it almost impossible to say the Creed each Sunday. Some have simply stopped saying it. Others do mental gymnastics in order to try and keep some internal integrity, whilst saying one thing and believing another. And this is what I find quite unacceptable, that the Church should so fail to recognise that huge numbers of its faithful people are being asked by default, to sacrifice their integrity on the altar of so called orthodoxy. And what is this orthodoxy? Is it the orthodoxy that forced Galileo to recant? Or the orthodoxy that

persecuted women who happened to be good healers and burnt them as witches? Or perhaps the orthodoxy that, just one hundred years ago, would declare a person a heretic if they did not believe in the literal and historical interpretation of Genesis 2, complete with talking serpent. Or nearer to home, the orthodoxy that would prefer to see people living miserably together or thereafter celibate, rather than accepting the possibility of re-marriage in church.

And in our present time we have an orthodoxy that condemns gay men and women to a life of celibacy whether they want it or not. Just as an aside here, I do think some people are psychologically and/or spiritually happiest and fulfilled leading a celibate life, but it needs to be a personal choice, not the prerequisite of some belief system, or the imposed condition of priesthood. In the Church of England at the moment, we have both institutionalised homophobia and duplicity. The official line is that gay priests must be celibate, no physical expression of their sexuality is allowable. One would think that, given the revelations of the past decade in the Roman Catholic Church, the effect of institutionalised suppression of sexual expression would have been noted. Apart from one or two of our bishops, who have both the courage and integrity to speak out in favour of a just and equitable treatment for gay clergy, the rest seem to live lives of official duplicity. The 'Nelson Syndrome' is rife, with blind eyes being turned in all directions. What does this mean in practice? Those gay men and

women who want to live a committed, open, monogamous lifestyle are prevented from doing so. What is their alternative? Forced celibacy (not an option most of our Bishops would care to opt for), or sex on the side, secret relationships and dangerous liaisons. Either our bishops are genuinely ignorant of who their gay clergy are, in which case they are probably the only ones

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in their diocese, and appallingly out of touch, or they are not being honest. The result of this is that the Bishop cannot be a true pastor for a significant number of his clergy. He cannot enquire how partners are. He cannot be supportive in difficulties. He must, under these circumstances, always be something of a threat holding out a big stick instead of a caring hand. It seems to be the case then, that in our own time, gay clergy

are prevented from living open and fulfilled lives in public, and bishops are either ignorant or dishonest. All this for the sake of some orthodoxy that, in another thirty years, will have passed into oblivion like the flat earth, the belief in witches and devils and the impossibility of re-marriage in church. The Church has, and continues to commit institution sin against groups and individuals all because of some orthodoxy or another that it has mistaken for the truth. I would not rate the present Pope amongst my contemporary heroes, but at least he has had the grace to apologise for some of the mistakes in the Church's past. But we continue to make mistakes. We continue to confuse culturally and historically limited expressions of truth with the truth itself. It must be time for a change.

Christianity is now two thousand years old, and whilst it is true to say that it has undergone a number of reforms, nothing has prepared it for the 21st century, and perhaps especially the revolution in psychological understanding in the past fifty years. It is my belief that if Christianity is to be at all meaningful for the majority of people, it will have to undergo revolutionary change in order to restore it as a credible system of belief or practice. Tinkering at the edges with minor changes to practices or liturgies is not enough. A fundamental change at the heart of Christian doctrine is called for, a change that will move us away from an emphasis on orthodoxy to orthopraxis, where ethical behaviour and relationships take priority over

belief and doctrinal correctness. Some might argue that the Church is having a revival, that the success of the Alpha courses show that traditional Christianity is alive and well. I would say alive yes, well no. Alpha Christianity peddles certainties. It is a form of fundamentalism that will naturally appeal to those who feel some degree of psychological insecurity. It is a balm for neurosis, and as such, may be better than nothing for those in need. But it is based on a belief system that encourages dependency not maturity, conformity rather than exploration. It is a form of ecclesiastical co-dependency. We need in the Church today to move beyond doctrinal orthodoxy that entails a high level of credulity and the suspension of the rational mind, to one that resonates with 21st century woman and man.

I want therefore to look at the central doctrine of Christianity, that which distinguishes it from the other great monotheistic religions, the divinity of Jesus Christ. When we within Christianity speak of Christ, there tends to be the assumption that we know what this term means, but it is a title full of ambiguity. As I understand it, the word Christ in Greek simply meant one who was anointed with oil, no more and no less. But within the context of the early church it came to mean '*the anointed one*,' the chosen one of God, the Messiah. So the Greek word Christ becomes hijacked to mean specifically the Jewish Messiah, but again, we understand this term retrospectively through Christian

eyes. We tend to assume that what we as Christians now mean by Messiah has the same connotations as it did for the Jewish population two thousand years ago. Nothing could be further from the truth.

If you ask modern Jews who or what the Messiah means to them, you are likely to get quite a variety of answers. A few years ago I was in conversation with a Rabbi Professor about the concept of the Messiah. It was his opinion that the whole idea of the Messiah would have died out within Judaism if Christianity had not been around to keep it alive. Another Rabbi friend said that there are currently a number of messianic expectation theories. One is to do with a quality of time. The messianic hope is based not on a person, but rather on a quality of time when Jewish people can live and worship peacefully according to their traditions, particularly in Israel. Some modern Jews would still hold to the concept of an expected person, whilst others would see it less in religious terms, and have translated the traditional messianic expectation into Zionism. For others it will be more personal, a sort of longed-for parental figure, or simply as part of Jewish identity, like eating kosher food. The point is, that the messiah is not a concrete reality, but is, rather, a concept that will inevitably be as variable as human perception is diverse and inventive. Like any other longed for hero figure, the messiah is a creation of the human mind, an extension into consciousness of the unconscious archetype within the psyche.

In Jesus' own time, and in the centuries that preceded him, it was equally true that there was not a single homogeneous messianic expectation, but rather a collection of beliefs and hopes that had a central theme, but different expressions. During the period between 200 BCE and the 1st century CE there were a number of differing expectations. Because of the rise of priestly power, there was the idea that there would be two messiahs, one a king, the other a priest, whilst others thought that the two roles would be fulfilled in one person. There was also the idea of a prophet precursor, not himself the messiah, and so comes the prophet, priest and king formulation beloved of Christianity. There was the notion that the name of the messiah was pre-existent. In Rabbinic tradition it was said that there were seven things created before the world was made, the torah, repentance, paradise, Gehenna, the throne of glory, the sanctuary and the name of the messiah. But although the name of the messiah was thought to be pre-existent, the messiah or messiahs were expected to be fully and totally human. For some, there was a clear belief and expectation that the coming of the messiah would bring a change in human history, and a restoration of Israel, whilst for others, the messianic expectation was eschatological, it would bring human history to a close.

We can see then, that at the time of Jesus, as now, there was no universal and harmonious messianic expectation, but rather a confused

mixture of beliefs and hopes that yearned for better times. The idealised nostalgia for the Davidic Kingdom was projected onto a variety of concepts. What unites these differing ideas of the messianic future are, I believe, two things. One, that they are humanly based. That is, that the messianic time or figure is rooted

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in human history. There was no expectation of divine intervention. Two, that the messianic hope is a psychological phenomena. What do I mean by this? That there is no justification in history for such an expectation. A hope or expectation that all will be made well is the perennial hope of individuals and communities from time immemorial. It is the hope of the hopeless and the power of the powerless. In reality, men and women singly and collectively, have to work out their own salvation (or integration) in this life. We do this by trying to create

laws and just societies, systems which punish wrong doing and reward the virtuous. We know this fails miserably, but it is the best we have managed so far. But because our human systems fail us, because there is injustice and wrongdoing, because those who commit evil are not always brought to book, and sometimes even

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seem to thrive, we need a hope to keep us going. The Jews had the messiah, the Greeks their heroes, the Romans their Gods and so forth. Today, in secular society, we have Batman, Superman and a whole multitude of ever increasingly unlikely heroes. Or we have the James Bonds who save the world on a regular basis, without even getting a hair out of place. It seems to me that the messiah is simply a religious version of the need for a hero, a saviour, someone who will right all the wrongs in a world, a world where there is a great deal of pain and misery.

So where does the Christian Christ fit into this pattern? And how does it fit into or onto, the life of Jesus of Nazareth, and does the Christ motif have a contemporary psychological relevance? As we have seen, the concept of Christ as the Christian Church understands it, is quite different from that of the Jewish messiah. During the course of the first couple of centuries of the Christian era, as the stories of Jesus were told and re-told, as theology was developed, and as it spread outside of the Jewish context from which it came, there was a development of ideas and language form. To re-tell the ‘good news’ as early believers understood it - outside the Jewish context in which it originated - demanded a language or a symbolism that was accessible to the Greek and Roman mind. Both of these cultures were steeped in the idea of deities in human form, of gods who became or begot human incarnations. In the geographical setting of the Middle-East, and at that particular point in history, experience mingled with culture. Belief systems came together to bring about the particular myth that is Jesus Christ. Here we have both God and man, Jewish Messiah and Greek Logos, temporally limited and eternally omnipotent.

The Christ then, as understood by the Christian Church, is an amalgam of Jewish messianic expectation and Greek and Roman mythology, he is the archetypal hero saviour figure who has appeared in myths and legends from the earliest time. The difference with Christianity

is that time and culture allowed the eternal myth or archetype to be projected onto a single historical figure, Jesus the Nazarene. In the prologue to John's gospel, we hear that the 'Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. It is I think, rather the other way round, that the flesh became Word.

The Christ is eternal inasmuch as it is an archetype, but archetypes cannot be fully embodied in one person, rather an archetype is expressed in the life of individuals, but the expression will always be mediated by that individual and the shape of their own psyche and human experience. For those unfamiliar with the concept of archetypes, let me just give a brief definition as I understand it.

In the same way that we can observe that in both humankind and animals there are, built into the system so to speak, instinctual behaviours that require no learning, so the archetypes might be described as the 'instincts of the soul'. In the same way that a bird knows instinctively how to build a nest (or use someone else's), or a baby knows how to suck the breast, so the soul has built-in mechanisms that recognise dimensions of psychic reality or connectedness. One can debate where these archetypes come from. One school might say that they are part of the evolutionary process, hard-wired in our nervous system by millennia of experience. Another, that they are a God given part of our humanity, others again would want to deny their existence altogether. I

am not terribly worried about these arguments, they are to psychology what the finer arguments about the nature of the Trinity are to Systematic Theology, interesting to a few people, but totally irrelevant to 99.9% of the population. The theory of archetypes is for me a working hypothesis that makes some sense, so I shall continue to use it until some better hypothesis takes its place.

Using this hypothesis then, of 'soul instincts', I would suggest that the Christ archetype is the archetype of the perfected human being. The person completely in tune with him or her self, and in tune with that which the Church would call God, and Jung and some Eastern religions would call the Self. In psychological terms it is the person who is thoroughly integrated, has full congruence or has achieved individuation. Buddhists I think would call it enlightenment. This Christ archetype is built-into the human psyche and is constantly wanting expression in the world. And there are three routes for this expression. One is hero worship, the idolisation and adulation of figures past, present or legendary, common to all school age children, and rather too many adults as well. The second is the kind of religion that projects the archetype onto someone else, or some divinely constituted set of laws, so living it vicariously in a second-hand sort of way, but under the guise of having divine authority. The third way is to simply live it. To *be* the hero, to *be* the Christ, to live the incarnation rather than believe in it. Of course the latter way is far more risky, and

most of us settle for hero worship or religion, for in so doing, it acknowledges that the archetype is there, but avoids the inevitable dangers that accompany the hero's journey.

So who was Jesus of Nazareth? Was he the Christ, the Son of God and the second person of the Trinity as orthodox Christianity says? Or was he just a man? Well I think the answer is probably both. He was just a man in terms of his human parentage, his fallibility, his physiology and his psychology, just as much a human being as any other. But he is the Christ in as much as he surely lived out something of the archetype amongst his fellows and inspired a way of living that has lasted two thousand years. His teaching and his life could not be abolished by his death. He had manifested the archetype in himself, and had awoken it in others. The stories of the resurrection and of Pentecost are surely pictorial representations of the lives of those who have had the Christ archetype awoken in their souls. Jesus is alive today inasmuch as he represents the archetype that is in every human soul (or psyche). Carl Jung says this:

'...what happens in the life of Christ happens always and everywhere. In the Christian archetype all lives of this kind are prefigured and are expressed over and over again or once and for all.'

So how might Christianity understand itself in archetypal terms? It might be a form that is religion-less, but I do not think that

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would necessarily be the case. We need our symbols and rituals, we need rites of passage, we need liturgies and myths to connect us to depths of our own psyches. We have a need for God (I appreciate that the very word 'god' is almost too loaded to use). But God will always be, must always be, mystery. Any religion that limits God to specific beliefs, creeds, doctrines and dogmas is doing a psychological service to its adherents, but is reducing the infinite to manageable and safe proportions. Carl Jung again:

'What is ordinarily called 'religion' is a substitute (for immediate experience) to such an amazing

degree that I ask myself seriously whether this kind of 'religion,' which I prefer to call a creed, may not have some important function in human society. The substitute has the obvious purpose of replacing *immediate experience* by a choice of suitable symbols tricked out with an organised dogma and ritual.....So long as these two principles work, people are effectively protected against immediate religious experience.'

What I mean by the Churches giving a psychological service to its adherents, is to echo what Jung says. Dogmatic religion is a safe container for neurosis. It gives structure and meaning to life, but effectively insulates the believer from actually having to encounter his or her own unconscious depths, where both the source of neurosis and archetypal experience are to be found. In other words, to believe in Jesus Christ as an historical and supernatural figure, prevents the believer from actually having to discover his or her own Christ archetype and live it in the world. It is a psychological truism that we project onto others those things we find unacceptable in ourselves. This of course is equally true of our greatness, our light and our power, as it is of our less virtuous qualities. As Nelson Mandela so aptly put it:

'Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. It is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.'

I want to suggest that dogmatic, orthodox Christianity (or any other

dogmatic religious or psychological system) keeps us in the dark and prevents us from living the Christ archetype, by projecting it onto the historical figure of Jesus, other religious leader or system of 'truths'. It is time that we withdraw the projection, and own it for ourselves. The potential that resides in us is castrated by fear. Our own fear of being powerful beyond measure, and the Churches (or other dogmatic bodies) fear that its truth will be diluted or destroyed. But the reality is, I believe, that the Church itself has all but destroyed the truth by its insistence on maintaining dogmatic formulations of belief, rather than encouraging real encounter with the divine. In other words, on orthodoxy rather than orthopraxis. In the past couple of years, we have seen two instances where the Church has officially silenced people for raising issues that might encourage people to think for themselves, rather than sticking to a creaky old orthodoxy which no longer speaks to our current age. At Epiphany in 2001, Derek Stanesby, a retired Canon of Windsor, preached a sermon that suggested that the Bible was not the Word of God, but points to the Word of God, and that, quote: 'Instead of looking for God in heavenly signs we should look and find him in earthly things'. For this piece of outrageous heresy, Canon Stanesby was banned from preaching by the rector of the parish, with the full support of the Bishop. And in the Church Times on December 14th, it was reported that the Dean of Clonmacnoise, the Very Reverend Andrew Furlong was taking three months leave to, and I quote;

'consider the Bishop's concerns regarding his public statements on doctrinal issues relating to faith and belief.' It would seem that, like the issue of gay clergy in the church, doctrinal exploration is best kept secret, lest we frighten the horses. No wonder those outside the Church often regard it with a mixture of amusement, contempt or disbelief, and those wanting to find expression for a transpersonal psychology find little encouragement with established religion.

Now I am sure that there will be those who say that if we abandon belief in Jesus as the Christ, the only Son of God, then Christianity itself becomes null and void. That Christianity *is* belief in Jesus, and without it there is nothing left. Here I would disagree most strongly. We can still believe in Jesus, but instead of using First Century terminology, we can use language that resonates with our own age. We can believe in Jesus as the historical expression of the ultimate archetype, the divine hero. We can believe that his embodiment of that archetype is a paradigm for our own humanity. We can believe that Christianity is a way of living, rather than a way of believing. We can believe that we can do it too.

Of course the Church will have to let go of medieval theories of atonement, of original sin, of crude interpretations of the Bible that uses it like an instruction manual. And we shall have to think for ourselves, instead of being told what to believe by clerics and bishops, some of whom have never had an original thought in

their lives. It will not be safe, it will not be for the neurotically fragile, nor will it not be for those who require security more than reality.

Christianity which holds very lightly to its creeds, doctrines and orthodoxies may seem to some no more than a form of Humanism. Well, maybe it is, but is that such a bad thing? The Christian Church throughout much of its history has behaved with a real lack of humanity. Its orthodoxies have killed, tortured, suppressed and psychologically damaged countless thousands of people. When I look at what orthodoxy has done, I would not mind being given the label of heretic or humanist. There have been some fine people in that tradition.

It might seem to some people that I want to jettison almost everything. I do not. I only want to jettison interpretations that tie us to a history long gone, where the truth no longer is, for the truth must be found for every individual, for themselves, in the here and now. I was once asked, 'what would you keep?' The answer is; the parable of the Good Samaritan. The story is preceded by the theological question 'Who shall inherit eternal life?' Now if we think of eternal life as a quality rather than a quantity, a quality that starts now, then Christianity as orthopraxis is all there. In the story, it is not the two men who fulfil their religious duty by passing by on the other side who will gain eternal life. It is the man who breaks both his religious code and his ethnic taboos in order to be a compassionate

human being who, we are told, acts in a neighbourly way and will achieve eternal life. Perhaps the Good Samaritan might be thought of as the first Humanist?

I am not a great fan of Saint Augustine, but I think one can hardly go wrong if one follows his edict to 'Love, and then what you will, do.'

What might be some of the implications if an archetypal Christianity, based on orthopraxis rather than orthodoxy, were adopted by the Church?

Well, the Church itself would have to live by one of its own central doctrines, that to live we must die. As an institution, the Church preaches death and resurrection, but

avoids living it like the plague. In the Church we focus on death and resurrection as a supposed event two millennia ago, but we fail to incarnate that reality in our life today. For there to be new life in the Church, the old understanding, which suited the pre-scientific mind, has to die. Not be patched-up, fiddled with or given a make-over, but to die. We need a new language for a new age. If it has the courage to do this, then I believe the Church will thrive. If it does not, it will eventually become a preserve for those who find it a container conducive for their neurosis, but will have nothing to say to anyone else.

But the Church is always looking inward, busy as Bonhoeffer said, 'answering questions that no one is asking'. I want to be looking outward and especially in our current climate, outwards towards our brothers and sisters of other faith traditions, and outwards to the psychological community of which I am just as much a part. If the Church were able to understand Christianity in archetypal terms, it would transform it from an exclusive belief based religion, into an inclusive ethically based system for all humanity.

I realise of course, that the words Christ and Christianity are now so loaded with two thousand years history and missionary zeal, that it will be impossible to use the words at all meaningfully as signifying something archetypal. The Church has set them in concrete, and in concrete they are likely to remain. But, just supposing we were able to get beyond that literal understanding

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to one where Jesus is seen as a representation of humanity at its best. He can be an example along with others from other faith traditions, the prophets, great teachers, exemplars of love in action. What would this do to our relationship with the other great world faith traditions? It would put us on an equal footing. Christianity would be saying we believe in one God (without the proviso that he is also three), and through the example of the Jewish teacher Jesus of Nazareth, we want to explore with our brothers and sisters under God, creative ways of dialogue in our troubled world. I am not sure if true dialogue can ever take place between those who believe that their particular revelation is superior to everybody else's. We should all, I believe, start from the proposition that God is mystery, and that every revelation from every tradition has something to give and something to learn. Every religion is culturally and historically limited in its expression, the nature of human perception means that it can be no other way. But in recognising our limitations, the influences of history and culture, we are able to let go of the past that is dead and gone, and find new and creative ways of representing and living the truth as it was experienced two thousand years ago in Jerusalem, or fourteen hundred years ago in Mecca, or two thousand five hundred years ago under a Bodhi tree...or in different and partial ways by Freud, Jung, Rogers or Erikson.

Christianity was born in a particular time and culture, but to quote the words of Jesus himself, it has to be 'born again,' ...and again and again. So to return to where we started, with the words of Carl Jung: 'Eternal truth needs a human a language that alters with the spirit of the times.'

Archetypal Christianity is an attempt to find an appropriate language for the spirit of our times. In fact, it is as old as the hills. It is older than the Galilean preacher Jesus of Nazareth, for it is part of our psychological heritage refined through millennia of evolution. Or to put it in religious language, it is the gift of God to all humankind. It is not a system to be believed in, but something to be lived out, in expressions of love and compassion by people of every faith and none. It is my attempt to express a living myth, and perhaps in the process, enable those drawn to transpersonal psychology to see beyond the crusty façade of institutionalised religion, to the living myth(s) that emanate from the depths of the human psyche.

Further Reading

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