CHAPTER 1

Alternative Christs: an introduction

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Few if any individuals have had such a profound influence on Western culture as Jesus. Or rather, few if any cultural icons have had a comparable importance. For those who are intent on determining who Jesus really was, the status of the sources poses apparently insurmountable problems. Books on his life are plentiful, and range from the ultra-skeptical extreme of denying that Jesus even existed, to the literalist one of accepting the Gospel stories (in suitably harmonized form) as a historically accurate record. Even a cursory acquaintance with this literature shows that there is no consensus regarding even one single detail of his life or teachings.

Mainstream churches, from Late Antiquity to the present day, have traditionally relied on the works included in the New Testament canon to provide them with a picture of the life of Jesus. These works, however, are documents of faith rather than of history. They were composed several decades after the death of their main protagonist, display numerous internal inconsistencies, are spotty in their coverage, and promote ideological agendas. The extracanonical sources are plentiful, but are for the most part composed at even later dates, and are at least as ideologically biased. In short, even the earliest accounts of the life of Jesus interlace whatever historical kernel they may contain with abundant legendary material.

Jesus legends form part of the core mythology of various religious groups. The human being Jesus is also, among other things, the mythologized bearer of a religious message and the flesh-and-blood manifestation of a transcendent being: Christ. The scriptures of early Christianity are not formulated as systematic theological tracts, and the precise relationship of Jesus the human being, Jesus the purveyor of a divine message, and Jesus as Christ is never spelled out in precise detail. A number of religious currents nevertheless agree on the basic proposition that Jesus was all of these, and elaborate the details in widely divergent ways. It thus makes only limited sense to separate legends of Jesus from myths of Christ – they form part and parcel of the same religious discourses.

What from one perspective could be seen as historically problematic sources and vague doctrines can also be construed as opportunities for religious innovation. The numerous gaps in the earliest texts on the life of Jesus were soon filled in with further details; the tantalizing clues to what it meant for Jesus to be Christ soon led to a dazzling variety of Christologies.

Already in the New Testament texts of the late first century, there are clues to the effect that the first followers of Christ understood him in different ways. The First Epistle of John polemically distinguishes "correct" opinions from "false" ones:

> Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God. And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world (1 John 4.2–3, KJV).

More abundant sources from the second and third centuries CE show that by that time, theological divergence was rampant. These early sources document a variety of opinions that in time received their own appellations, of which a few can be mentioned here.[1] *Adoptionism* is the name given to the view that Jesus was in essence a human being and became the Son of God through God's adoption of him, for instance at his baptism. *Separationists* similarly understood Jesus as a human, who had become savior by receiving an influx of divinity, the Christ, into his person. *Patripassianist* or *modalist* writers suggested that Jesus was identical to God the Father, and that it was the latter who had descended to earth in human form, had suffered, died and had risen again. *Docetism* was the opinion that Christ as a divine being did not have an ordinary human body during his incarnation, but only appeared to do so; in particular, he did not really suffer and die on the cross. *Arianism*, which arose a few generations later, that is in the fourth century, affirmed that Jesus was a perfect or even transcendent being, but that he was nevertheless different from and less divine than God the Father.

Each of these terms in turn covers a gamut of opinions. This can, for instance, be seen from various gnostic Christologies, myths which can generally be placed in the separationist and docetic camps, but nevertheless display many differences of detail. Recently, the appropriateness of affixing a shared label to such a diverse set of religious traditions has been

[1] The following thumbnail sketches of early Christologies is dependent on J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (5th edn., London: A. & C. Black, 1977), Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Charles Kannengiesser, S. J., "Arianism," in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan 1986), vol. I, 405–406.

questioned.[2] The main argument against the term is that it masks a plurality of currents united by little more than an unreflective adoption of orthodox Christian heresy charges. However, it is clear from the sources that there were Christians who considered gnosis, a particular religious insight, necessary for salvation. The term can be used as shorthand for the various divergent opinions that emerge from a careful reading of those sources. In his chapter, Roelof van den Broek discusses a variety of views which are documented in gnostic texts, or can be tentatively reconstructed from the arguments of their opponents. Christ plays a variety of different roles in the cosmic emanation mythologies that portray the emergence from the highest divine principle of a number of *aeons* or divine qualities. Gnostic writers were confronted with the question of how this spiritual figure could possibly be related to the historical person of Jesus. Some adopted the view that Christ had never been incarnated at all, and that his human body was only illusory. Such a non-corporeal being could of course not have resurrected in the flesh. Others, however, understood the divine and human natures to have been united in Jesus, with little attempt to solve the difficulties inherent in this position.

This early period also saw the development of biographical Jesus legends that came to be excluded from the emerging canon. Various extracanonical sources, examined in the chapter by Einar Thomassen, present an array of Jesus legends. Readers of these apocrypha will find details of Jesus' physical appearance, and stories that affirm that Jesus had the miraculous ability to shift shape at will. There are details regarding the birth of Jesus and his childhood that fill in missing details in the Gospel traditions. Other extracanonical sources portray Jesus as a teacher of secret wisdom, and provide tantalizing clues as to the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Christological themes are presented in ways that complement or contradict canonical passages: various texts deny that Jesus suffered on the cross, follow him as he descends into Hell, and extend the stories of Jesus' appearances after his resurrection in new directions.

Together, these two contributions document the plurality of religious options in Late Antiquity. It took political processes culminating in the fourth and fifth centuries CE to produce a certain degree of uniformity in the emerging church; the acceptance of "mainstream" views was, however, never absolute. The processes that led to this partial streamlining have

[2] For attempts to deconstruct the "Gnosticism" label, see Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) and Karen King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

been described in a vast literature, and need only be recapitulated in their barest essentials, as a background to subsequent developments. Conflicts between rival groups, especially between those who claimed that Christ and God the Father were of the same substance, and those who espoused the view that Christ was not essentially divine, but had been created by God, led to a protracted series of conflicts. The council of Nicaea (325) led to a tentative formulation of orthodoxy, a view of Christ as fully divine and fully human that was enforced as binding at the council of Constantinople (381). Emperor Theodosius attempted to outlaw the opposing Arian point of view in the 380s, without succeeding in eradicating it entirely. If these councils managed to create consensus about the relationship between Christ and the Father, the precise nature of the connection between human and divine in Christ was still a matter of heated discussion among the religious elites. The council of Chalcedon (451) attempted to formulate a definitive answer, but did so by excluding other alternatives. By the mid-fifth century, leading spokespersons for Western Christianity had arrived at the formulation of an orthodox position, according to which Christ is one with and of the same substance as the Father, a single person with fully human and fully divine natures.

Despite the attempts at these church councils to formulate and enforce a binding doctrine regarding the nature of Christ, emerging orthodoxy never succeeded in suppressing alternative understandings. Two of these non-orthodox fifth-century Christologies were particularly influential. *Nestorians* regarded Jesus Christ as containing two distinct natures: divine and human; *Monophysites* held that the two natures had fused into one single unitary being. These perhaps arcane distinctions became identity markers for various regional churches. Nestorian churches were established in – among other places – Syriac-speaking parts of the Middle East, the Coptic Church opted for the Monophysite creed, while Arianism for another century or two remained the preferred option among various Germanic peoples, such as the Goths. The Western church continued to combat residual "heresies" in its territories; even within the confines of the orthodox formulation, however, enough leeway was left for religious creativity to blossom – views of Jesus that will be pursued no further here, but which are amply documented in the existing literature.[3]

The differences between adherents of emerging orthodoxy, of Arianism, Nestorianism, and Monophysitism may strike a modern reader as matters

[3] See, e.g., Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985 and many reprints).

of detail, truly "alternative" only for those involved in the power struggles and schisms of the fourth and fifth centuries. However, a number of much more divergent "non-orthodox" views survived and flourished by becoming important elements of organizationally distinct religions.

Jason BeDuhn discusses the Jesus legends of the Manichaeans, and documents a number of Christological developments that gave the version of the Christian tradition constructed by Mani (216–ca. 277 CE) and his followers a quite distinct character. The double mythological role, found also in mainstream Western Christianities, of Jesus as crucified savior, forms the basis of various aspects of Manichaean Christology. In his role as one saved, Jesus shares a common nature with all living things. There is no essential difference between the divine and the soul entrapped in matter and in need of salvation – indeed, the extensive use of crucifixion metaphors includes the idea that the soul is everywhere crucified in the material world. As savior, Jesus delivers the directives of Christ that guide each person's life, and by his example he offers a paradigm for the Manichaean believer, who is encouraged to live his life in imitation of Christ. His role as savior is also manifest in his role as inspiration to all prophets throughout history, his task as psychopomp (helping the soul on its journey into the afterlife), and in his function as judge at the end of time.

In the seventh century CE, Jesus appears in the text of the Qur'an, and becomes the basis of a series of Islamic reflections on Jesus as prophet. Jan Hjärpe's chapter surveys the ways in which the figure of Jesus (known as 'Isa in the Islamic tradition) is presented in the Qur'an, enters the hadith literature (the traditions regarding the sayings and actions of the prophet Muhammad and his followers), passes on to the traditions created in Sufi milieus and in popular piety, and finally appears in new guises in contemporary literature, literary fiction and in ethical debates. The emphasis placed in Islam on the oneness of God rules out any implication that Jesus is in any way consubstantial with the godhead. Rather, Jesus is considered a prophet, one among many who have received a revelation from God. Nevertheless, Islamic sources share numerous other motifs with various Christian concepts: Jesus as miracle worker, as eschatological figure, and as ethical role model.

The process of incorporating Jesus into distinct religious traditions has continued up to our own time. Although Christians have been present in southern India since at least the third century CE, the incorporation of Christ in Hindu traditions is a much more recent phenomenon, in particular emerging in the nineteenth century. Hindu Christologies of the colonial period have been discussed in a number of previous studies. Bradley

Malkovsky, in his chapter "Christ in Hinduism," breaks new ground by moving beyond these classical Hindu assessments of Christ and bringing us up to date with more recent developments, not only in regard to the formulation of Hindu Christologies, but also and especially in reference to the method used by contemporary Hindus as they question both standard Christian and standard Hindu understandings of Christ.

With the remaining contributions in this book, we return to the Christian and post-Christian West. As we will see, Christ has over the centuries been understood, among other things, as a purveyor of secret knowledge for the initiated few, as an equivalent of the philosophers' stone, as a feminine redeemer, and in many other roles. This plurality is all the more remarkable, given that Christology has been a topic so central to the dominant religious ideologies of the West that the borders of the acceptable were for many centuries policed with extraordinary zeal.

Some alternative Christologies managed to survive, albeit temporarily, by being part of what could anachronistically be called subcultures, networks of people whose distinct interests allowed for the circulation of rather unorthodox opinions. Urszula Szulakowska's chapter "Christ and the alchemical mass" discusses the ways in which writers on alchemy forged novel views of Christ. During the sixteenth century, the image of Jesus Christ was used to symbolize the philosopher's stone, while his passion and crucifixion became an allegory of the laboratory process. The philosopher's stone was understood to be a substance both material and spiritual, immanent and transcendent like Christ himself. The stone's alternative designation was "quintessence," an aetherial matter, spiritual in nature but with a physical body. The alchemical stone was believed to be the Christ-savior of the mineral kingdom, turning base matter into gold. It became mystically identified with the glorified body of the resurrected Christ. In fact, the stone's transformative effect on the metals was mirrored by its redemption of the body and soul of the alchemist himself.

Other "alternative" Christologies were formulated or defended by individuals who managed with varying degrees of success to navigate difficult political waters. The two following chapters deal with Christologies that emerged from the religious creativity of such people. In Jean-Pierre Brach's chapter we are introduced to the Renaissance polymath Guillaume Postel (1510–1581), who created one of the most extraordinary Christologies of the early modern age. The medieval mystic Bernard de Clairvaux had in the twelfth century proclaimed the appearance of Christ in three distinct phases: once on earth as Jesus, once in the final apocalypse, and between these two in a third, invisible state in the Eucharist. Early in his career,

in 1547, Postel elaborated on this Bernardian theme by adding a fourth coming of Christ. Postel had met the Messiah come again – this time in the person of a poor Venetian woman. This led to new and often remarkably heterodox theological statements on Postel's part regarding salvation, the doctrine of the Eucharist, and the nature of Christ's celestial body. His writings proved so unpalatable to church authorities that Postel was summoned to appear before an inquisitorial court, barely escaping with his life by being declared insane.

Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) was a visionary whose religious doctrines are deeply indebted both to traditional Christian theology and to a radical type of Enlightenment rationality. Wouter Hanegraaff's chapter shows how Swedenborg combined these two seemingly incompatible approaches. His Christology rejected orthodox trinitarianism in favor of an appeal to God's unity, claiming that it was God Jehovah himself who was incarnated in the person known as Christ. Swedenborg's innovative understanding of Christ was based upon his peculiar combination of strict biblicism, a relentless pursuit of logic and consistency, and a personal conviction of being the chosen instrument of divine revelation.

Yet other "alternative" views of Christ materialized as new church organizations began to emerge. Douglas Davies' chapter "Christ in Mormonism" identifies a series of images of Christ that exist within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, that is the Mormon Church. Various images have dominated at different periods of the Church's history: Christ in the Plan of Salvation, in visionary appearance, as Jehovah, and as Elder Brother; the pro-active Christ of Gethsemane and the passive Christ of the cross; Jesus as the Christ in resurrection appearances in the Holy Land, in America and to the Lost Tribes of Israel; Jesus in his Second Coming as King of the world.

Swedenborg and the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith were innovative religious figures in a repressive age. Because of restrictions on the freedom of the press in Sweden, Swedenborg published all of his religious works outside of his native country, primarily in Holland and England. Neither this fact nor the fact that he did not try to organize a church enabled him to escape controversy with the church in Sweden. Toward the end of his life two men who had accepted his teachings became embroiled in a heresy trial as a result of propagating the new ideas. Similarly, Joseph Smith and the church that he founded were from the very inception enmeshed in conflicts with surrounding society, and were repeatedly persecuted and driven out of their settlements. By the late nineteenth century, such repressive measures against religious dissidents were no longer the norm. The decreasing ability

of the theological mainstream to enforce discipline through legal means has allowed new narratives to spread with little opposition, and the rate of innovation has accelerated in the last century and a half. Cheaper means of mass distribution have made it possible for a much broader range of people to contribute with their own voices to the discussion of "who Christ really was." In the last few years, anybody with a computer with Internet access and the modest technical know-how necessary in order to set up a website has been able to disseminate their own Jesus narratives. The last five chapters of this book illustrate a number of very diverse understandings of Jesus Christ that have emerged from the 1870s to today.

As shown in James Santucci's contribution to this book, the conception of the Christ in the theosophical tradition reflects attitudes and teachings more allegorical than historical. The teachings of the various theosophical authors are not homogeneous, but there are two observations that are for the most part accepted: the fundamental distinction between Jesus and the Christ and the subordinate role of Jesus to the Christ. As one "overshadowed" by the Christ, Jesus assumes importance as a teacher sent by a brotherhood or spiritual hierarchy to guide human evolution. The teachings of the atonement, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and the second coming all take on a meaning summarized by theosophist Annie Besant (1847–1933) as enabling "every man . . . to become a Christ."

Ariosophy, described in the chapter by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, is a Christian variant of the *völkisch* (nationalist-racialist) ideology widespread among the intellectual precursors of the Third Reich in the period 1900 to 1935. Conceived by the former Cistercian monk, Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels (1874–1954), Ariosophy expounded a form of Christianity based on the idea that the Aryan race was divine. Lanz's racial theology described a clash between these god-like Aryans and various demonic dark races, a scenario he supported by referring to a decidedly idiosyncratic biblical exegesis. Lanz also assimilated aspects of the natural sciences, and in particular understood electricity as a form of divine revelation and inspiration. In his book *Theozoologie* (1905), he suggested that the divine ancestors of the Aryan race had possessed extraordinary electrical powers such as telepathy and omniscience. Lanz identified Christ as just such an "electrical" being, who came to redeem a fallen humankind from bestial miscegenation through a revival of the racial gnosis.

Metaphysical Christianity is a term which includes a variety of currents, ranging from New Thought denominations to churches oriented more toward theosophy and spiritualism. These movements reject traditional theological views regarding, among other things, sin and hell, and embrace a view of the human being as basically good. We are all part of God, and we

will all eventually be "saved." In most systems of metaphysical Christianity, Christ becomes a divine principle and Jesus becomes a human being who is honored as the person who best exemplified the Christ principle in his life. Jesus thus does not save us by "atoning" for our sins. Instead, he serves as a model for human striving by demonstrating perfect "at-one-ment" with God. James R. Lewis' chapter concentrates on the Christology of one such metaphysical Christian group, the Church of the Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness (MSIA).

The Aetherius Society, the subject of a chapter by Mikael Rothstein, is one of the largest and certainly oldest UFO religions. It was founded by the late George King in London in 1954 when he, according to the movement's founding myth, was approached by extraterrestrials and told to serve as their prophet or "Terrestrial Channel." One of these benevolent space creatures is, according to The Aetherius Society, the same entity as the Jesus of the New Testament. Hence, George King had on several occasions been in direct contact with Jesus, either when he visited Earth or during trips in Commander Jesus' space ship Mars Sector 6. Rothstein's chapter attempts to explore the mythological reformulation of Jesus in various aspects of the religious life of the Aetherius movement: texts, rituals, hagiography, iconography, and so forth. He argues that the Jesus of The Aetherius Society is different from, yet in some ways very similar to, the Jesus of "traditional" Christian mythology, a fact that suggests that religious symbols can be quite stable over time, yet allow for very variable interpretations.

The final chapter surveys a number of contemporary Jesus legends, but does so principally in order to discuss and illustrate some theoretical points: how do such narratives relate to more general processes of religious innovation? Although the title of this book stresses the "alternative" nature of these and other understandings of Jesus Christ, the scare quotes alert us to a potential pitfall with the term. Vestiges of earlier heresiological thinking still influence prevalent theorizing on the development of "alternative" understandings of Jesus Christ. Major sociological theories, such as Colin Campbell's concept of the cultic milieu, presuppose that there is a dominant, nearly monolithic culture, in opposition to an underground of divergent and rather marginalized innovations.[4] Other theories, developed by cultural anthropologists over the last several decades, afford opportunities to understand religious innovation differently.

The concept of "culture" in early anthropological writings tended to be described as a fixed set of ideas, behaviors, artifacts, values, and so forth:

[4] Colin Campbell, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization," *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 (1972), 119–136.

each ethnic group, in this view, had a distinct culture shared by its members. Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn in a seminal text defined culture in such terms: "Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups."[5] The idea of a fairly monolithic religious landscape in the West, with the markedly distinct products of heterodox individual agency relegated to a separate countercultural cultic milieu, closely fits this view of culture.

Since at least the late 1970s, however, the representation of cultures as stable systems regulating individual behavior has been the subject of considerable critique. The assumption that a particular group shares a culture has been seen as masking the hegemony of the dominant strata of that group, and being blind to variability and diversity. Anthropologists such as Roy Wagner,[6] George Marcus, James Clifford,[7] Tim Ingold,[8] and many others have from a variety of perspectives suggested that "culture" is a problematic term, an abstraction created by the anthropologist in order to describe the manifold things that people do, rather than a monolithic model of and for behavior that people collectively inherit and embody.[9]

A number of different metaphors could be useful to conceptualize this more recent approach to culture and cultural variability. The one employed here is that of culture as a profuse repertoire of discourses and practices, that is, what other authors have labeled a "tool kit,"[10] or a "surfeit of cultural material."[11] The repertoire metaphor is helpful both in describing synchronic variation and change over time. Synchronic variation, as Fredrik Barth argues, is part of any complex society that encompasses people with different levels of expertise, different received traditions, local variations, various social strata and various pragmatic interests.[12] In the specific domain of religion, agents with different competences and interests can pick and choose different elements from the repertoire.

[5] Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Museum, 1952), 357.
[6] Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (2nd edn., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
[7] George Marcus and James Clifford, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
[8] Tim Ingold, "Introduction to Culture," in Tim Ingold (ed.), *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology: Humanity, Culture and Social Life* (London: Routledge, 1994), 329–349.
[9] The genealogy of the term "culture" is far more complex than can possibly be sketched here. For a background to the classic statement by Kroeber and Kluckhohn and to the debate of the 1980s and 1990s, see Adam Kuper, *Culture: the Anthropologists' Account* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).
[10] Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986), 277.
[11] Fredrik Barth, *Balinese Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 4.
[12] Barth, *Balinese Worlds*, 4–5.