

# THE AQUARIAN CHRIST

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. . . Your own Christ Self is your saviour. . . (Meyer)

In order to understand the relationship between new religions and society, it is profitable to examine how new religions of the 'Age of Aquarius' see Jesus Christ. I shall expound some aspects of this theme under four headings: the holistic framework; the Easter mystery; Jesus going East; and spiritualist channels. There are several other aspects, for example, Jesus as a magician, Jesus as a yogi, or the neo-Islamic picture of Jesus as a glorious prophet, which cannot be dealt with within the limits of a short essay. I shall focus mainly upon those branches of the new spirituality which have a definite background in theosophy or spiritualism.

## THE HOLISTIC FRAMEWORK

Briefly put, the fundamental world-view which provides the framework for the various christologies of the new religious movements discussed here is characterized by a tendency towards the monistic deification of man's higher Self. This modern version of monism is often designated *holism*, a word made up of both 'holy' and 'whole'. Holism might then be defined as

a world-view which perceives the totality of all that exists as a reflection of an ultimate oneness which is experienced in man's innermost Self, and realized through a life-style in harmony with the holiness and wholeness of life.

Modern man, who does not feel at home in a difficult, complex and pluralistic society, seems to be ready for the solution of going inwards. It is likely that the holistic world-view is a reaction against the schizoid mind so typical of modern man. The question of *identity* is at stake, which is also a question of how to regard oneself in relation to one's surroundings. An average Western city of today is a microcosm of the entire world of religions. The secularization and pluralization of a culture has somehow to be compensated for by the individual. Small groups offer the individual a sense of belonging which the nation or the culture is no longer able to offer.

Using sociological terminology, one might say that the loss of a major plausibility-structure (the common value-system of society) might be compensated for by joining small plausibility-structures, for

example, religious groups.<sup>1</sup> Or it might be compensated for through concentration on one's own personal identity. Most of the New Age religions offer their adherents an integration of microcosm (the human soul) into macrocosm (a fundamental *oneness* with everything there is). This latter viewpoint is significant in numerous movements of yoga and meditation, in occultism, in astrology, and in healing and health-food ideologies. It is the basis of the whole New Age spirituality.

In most of these circles there is also a growing expectancy of the dawn of a new era, of a better world than the present one, of the Age of Aquarius. In this New Age, a collective enlightenment of human consciousness will take place, and the great 'Christ' will be universally revealed. There will be peace in the mind of every individual and in the world as a whole. That is the ultimate goal of the holistic world-view, namely a total experience of cosmic bliss. This harmony is already here, in the innermost essence of the self; yet it is experienced only by a few.

#### THE EASTER MYSTERY

How does this kind of new religious movement preach the message of Easter? On Easter Sunday 1986, I had the opportunity to attend the services of some New Age communities in the Los Angeles area. In the course of that one day I was able to gain a good impression of the most important aspects of the figure of Jesus Christ as portrayed by these new religious movements.

On Easter Morning, the well-known occult writer Manly P. Hall, aged eighty-two, gave an address to 400 people in the assembly hall of the Philosophical Research Society in Los Angeles. His eloquently-delivered address lasted one and a quarter hours and contained the following message:

The significance of Jesus' death and resurrection was not primarily those historical events which took place 2000 years ago. What happened to Jesus was a timeless expression of *mystical initiation*. It did not primarily happen *there*. It happens *here*, in our own mind. It happens whenever a person passes through the stages of initiation, as expressed in the mystery religions of antiquity. 'Christ' is the divine power inherent in every human being, in everything that exists, even in the smallest grain of sand. We should fall down before the divine within us. And we should adore the divine in others as well. If we don't do that, we 'bury' the Christ within. But we can never stop the process of redemption. We can only delay it. The soul contains the whole power of salvation in its own nature which is the Christ-power, the indwelling divinity. It can never die. *The Easter mystery is the resurrection of the Christ Within!*

This teaching of the 'Inner Christ' recurs very frequently in these new

<sup>1</sup> See Hans Mol (ed.), *Identity and Religion: International Cross-Cultural Approaches* (London, 1978), and Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (New York, 1980).

religions. Jesus went through several stages of initiation, for instance, as an Essene monk, and finally 'became' a Christ, i.e., he realized the Christhood of his own soul. He is thus a prototype for the spiritual progression of every human being.

It is of fundamental importance, according to these new religions, to distinguish between 'Jesus' and 'Christ'. These two concepts have quite different connotations. The most disastrous error ever committed by the traditional church was the 'fatal identification of the Christ with Jesus'.<sup>2</sup> Jesus was an advanced historical person within the limitations of time, whereas 'Christ' means *a state of consciousness*, the oneness with the eternal divine principle. This divine principle is to be experienced within the soul of any person who prepares for it. Jesus realized the 'Christ within', as did Buddha, and as did all the great saints of all the religions. This inner enlightenment may be called 'Christhood', 'Buddahood',<sup>3</sup> or given another name. The reality which is experienced is exactly the same, the universal oneness of being, of supreme identity, of 'Christ Self'.

This kind of outlook is often combined with that of a 'holy tradition', i.e., the belief in certain 'masters' throughout history who have facilitated man's spiritual enlightenment. Every age has had its great master, as we have ours. The present master is often identified as the founder or leader of the new religious movement. Examples of this are Transcendental Meditation, the Divine Light Mission, the Rajneesh-movement, the Tara Community and Summit Lighthouse. The leader or founder sometimes claims to have a mission in today's world similar to that of Jesus, 2,000 years ago. The most well-known of such modern christs or 'messiahs' is Sun Myung Moon (Unification Church). Similar figures in the nineteenth century were Baha'u'llah (Bahai) and Ghulam Ahmad (Ahmadiyya).

The Theosophical Society claims that Jesus is one of the adepts. During his lifetime Jesus was a Cabbalist, a Gnostic, an Essene. He enjoyed, as all living adepts do, perfect mental and bodily health, and perfect consciousness. All advanced saints of any tradition, whether Buddhist, Egyptian, Chaldean, Persian or Jewish, are adepts; their teachings 'were identical from the beginning'.<sup>4</sup> Thus the term 'Christ', as a description of Jesus, does not mean a person, but is an 'embodied idea'.<sup>5</sup> 'Every good individual, therefore, may find Christ in his inner man. . . whether he be Jew, Hindu, or Christian'.<sup>6</sup> This is exactly the way in which most New Age religious movements portray Jesus Christ. I refer to it as *Christ syncretism*.

<sup>2</sup> C.W. Leadbeater, *The Christian Creed: Its Origin and Signification* (London, 1917), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Levi Eidhamar, 'Rajneesh's Understanding of Jesus', *Update*, 2 (1985), 21-7.

<sup>4</sup> H.P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Masterkey to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* (Los Angeles, 1968), ii. 142-53. Reprint of the 1877 edition.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 574.

<sup>6</sup> H.P. Blavatsky, *The Theosophical Glossary* (London, 1892), 84.

Vivekananda, the originator in the West of the idea of Jesus as *Avatar*, combined this idea with a strong attack on Christianity. There is no 'only-begotten' Son of God. There are many 'Sons of God'; God has incarnated Himself several times. This is seen as the pivotal issue in the encounter between Eastern spirituality and Western narrow-mindedness. Christians maintain that the 'Lord can manifest himself only once; there lies the whole mistake'.<sup>7</sup> 'Christ is not a man! Jesus was the man . . . becoming the Christ . . . The power, then, is the Christ. The pattern is Jesus'<sup>8</sup>; 'Look to the Christ within who shall be formed in every one of you, as he is formed in me (i.e., Jesus)'<sup>9</sup>; 'Christs and Buddhas are simply occasions upon which to objectify our own inner Powers.'<sup>10</sup> This attitude is almost omnipresent in this kind of new religion, in occult movements,<sup>11</sup> in neo-Hindu movements<sup>12</sup> and in the so-called New Age spirituality.<sup>13</sup> It is reflected in the very titles of new books on the subject, such as *Being a Christ*,<sup>14</sup> *Christs of the New Age*,<sup>15</sup> *Christ in You*,<sup>16</sup> *The Universal Christ: A New Age Portrait of Jesus of Nazareth*,<sup>17</sup> *The Mystical Christ*,<sup>18</sup> *Christ, Krishna and You*,<sup>19</sup> and others.

On Easter Eve I visited the Mystical and United Spiritualist Church in Anaheim. The service consisted of meditation, prayers, hymns, scripture readings, sermon and healings. It started with the recitation of *The Great Invocation* which functions as a kind of Lord's Prayer in most New Age movements:

From the point of Light within the Mind of God,  
Let Light stream forth into the minds of men.  
Let Light descend on Earth.

From the point of Love within the Heart of God,  
Let Love stream forth into the hearts of men.  
May Christ return to Earth.

From the centre where the will of God is known,  
Let purpose guide the little wills of men.  
The purpose which the Masters know and serve.

<sup>7</sup> Vivekananda, *The Yogas and Other Works*, ed. Swami Nikhilananda (New York, 1953), 720.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Furst (ed.), *Edgar Cayce's Story of Jesus* (London, 1968), 173f.

<sup>9</sup> Levi = Levi Dowling, *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*, twenty-seventh edition (Los Angeles, 1960), ch. 68:13, first published c. 1907.

<sup>10</sup> Vivekananda, *The Yogas*, 557.

<sup>11</sup> Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, 574.

<sup>12</sup> Yogananda, Paramahansa, *Metaphysical Meditations* (Los Angeles, 1976), 112.

<sup>13</sup> David Spangler, *Reflections on the Christ* (Findhorn, 1981), 129.

<sup>14</sup> Ann P. and Peter V. Meyer, *Being a Christ: The Basic Course of the Teaching of the Inner Christ*, fourth edition (San Diego, 1983), first published c. 1975.

<sup>15</sup> San Diego, 1971.

<sup>16</sup> Fourteenth edition (Maria Del Rey, 1983), first published c. 1910.

<sup>17</sup> Ilon (*pseud.*), (Laguna Beach, 1983).

<sup>18</sup> Manly P. Hall, *The Mystical Christ: Religion as a Personal Spiritual Experience* (Los Angeles, 1951).

<sup>19</sup> Swami Venkatesananda, *Christ, Krishna and You* (San Francisco, 1983).

From the centre which we call the race of men,  
 Let the Plan of Love and Light work out,  
 And may it seal the door where evil dwells.

Let Light and Love and Power restore  
 the Plan on Earth.

This invocation is said to have been revealed by 'Christ' to Alice Bailey in 1937. Her follower, Benjamin Creme, claims that it was given to him in June 1945 as a great mantra, 'a potent technique' for the salvation of the world, to which Christ announced his imminent return.<sup>20</sup>

The essence of the invocation is found in the passage 'May Christ return to Earth'. Many new religions claim that their own 'Christ' or avatar is present in this age. Benjamin Creme, head of the Tara Community (closely related to the Alice Bailey movement) maintains that 'Maitreya the Christ' is now living in London, in a so far hidden place. He came into the world by aeroplane and so fulfilled the prophecy of 'coming on the clouds'. On 8 July 1977 he descended from the Himalayas into the Indian sub-continent and went to one of the chief cities there. He had an acclimatization period between 8 and 18 July, and then, on 19 July, he entered a certain modern country by aeroplane. He is now an ordinary man in the world – 'an extraordinary, ordinary man.'<sup>21</sup>

This great event was advertised in seventeen major newspapers all over the world at the cost of \$250,000. Messages from this hidden Jesus Christ had been published for several years through the Tara Press. But now the time was ripe – the advertisement stated – for Christ's public appearance. He will be known in the world as the glorious LORD MAITREYA, who will save humankind from a third world war and from hunger. This appearance was announced to take place within two months. The saviour was to manifest himself on TV screens all over the world.

The framework of this message was entirely theosophical. References were explicitly made to those 'Masters' of wisdom (The White Brotherhood) who secretly guide the spiritual evolution of humankind. Further, it was stated that the coming Lord would fulfil what people of all religions have been longing for. Christians are waiting for the reappearance of Christ; the Jews for the Messiah; the Buddhists for the Fifth Buddha (or Maitreya); the Muslims for the Iman Madhi; the Hindus for Krishna (the avatar). They are all identical. The coming saviour is One. This conception is a typical example of *Christ syncretism*. Christ is used as a concept for the unification of the religions of the world. It is further stated that this saviour has chosen a

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin Creme, *The Reappearance of the Christ and the Masters of Wisdom* (London, 1980), 31f.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

certain man in the world to be the bodily vehicle for his visible manifestation. Although it is not stated directly, one is not intended to be left in any doubt that this man is Benjamin Creme.

#### JESUS GOING EAST

During the service on Easter Eve mentioned above, the scripture reading of the Easter story was from a modern apocryphal gospel entitled *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*. This holy scripture claims to be received through direct revelation. According to its title-page, it was 'transcribed from the book of God's remembrance, known as the Akashic Records, by Levi (i.e. Levi H. Dowling) in 1907. The subtitle states that this is 'The Philosophic and Practical Basis of the Religion of the Aquarian Age of the World'. Its main message concerns how Jesus travelled as a neophyte in search of higher mystical wisdom. This he finally found in the mysteries of Egypt. He went through the highest initiations and finally became a 'Christ'. He then returned to Palestine and fulfilled his ministry of healing, of death and of resurrection, prototypically for all humankind.

Behind the Aquarian Gospel is another apocryphal gospel which is commonly quoted in today's New Age religions, namely *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* (1890), by Nicholas Notovitch.<sup>22</sup> Although the pattern is similar, the scope is rather different. Notovitch, a Russian-born Jew, presents a very limited syncretism which is governed by Judaic premises, whereas Levi represents a mystical, esoteric kind of syncretism. Notovitch pictures a glorious, divine prophet chosen by God to fight idolatry, sun-worship and magic wherever it occurs;<sup>23</sup> Levi describes a profound mystic, a great teacher who, at last, attains to full illumination and becomes the Christ. The main burden of Notovitch is to call for sympathy with the Righteous One who became a martyr;<sup>24</sup> the climax of Levi's story is Jesus' initiation into the seventh grade of the Egyptian brotherhood. 'You are a neophyte no more, but now a master mind. . . THE CHRIST'.<sup>25</sup> Here, in Egypt, he finally found what he had been searching for in India, Nepal, Tibet, Persia, Assyria and Greece. He was now prepared for his service, which was to take place in Palestine during the last three years of his life. He fulfilled this task, through his healing ministry, teaching, crucifixion and resurrection. Afterwards he materialized himself, in a spiritualist sense, several times for his disciples. This crescendo towards fulfilment is totally lacking in Notovitch's story. He pictures a man, in whom God was manifested,

<sup>22</sup> Santa Monica, 1980. First published in the United States by R.F. Fenno and Company, New York, 1890. It was translated by J.H. Conelly and L. Landsberg, and copyrighted by G.W. Dillingham, 1890.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.26, 8.6-9.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, chs. 1 and 2; 14.2-3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.6-12.

but who was rejected and crucified. His concept of God has a slight flavour of Cabbalism, but this feature is never elaborated. Notovitch's main theme is the tragic history of Jesus who was the manifestation of the Mysterious God. Jesus did not rise from the dead, he asserts, but was secretly removed from the grave by Roman soldiers.

One significant feature common to both versions is the hostile attitude towards all established religious traditions. This corresponds to the anti-Church attitude found in most New Age religions. Jesus' controversies with the Brahmanic or Zoroastrian priesthood are like the controversies with the scribes in the New Testament.<sup>26</sup>

Some further comments are required about the type of syncretism found in these two stories. Strangely, the syncretism in Notovitch is quite the opposite of what is commonly found in the New Age religions. Notovitch paints a limited picture of Jesus as an Old Testament, perhaps also Islamic-inspired, prophet who learns and accepts 'Buddhism'<sup>27</sup> and even uses Buddha as a name of the Creator-God.<sup>28</sup> The name of Jesus, 'Issa', might have been borrowed from Islam. At the same time, Jesus attacks the Vedas, where the truth is 'perverted'.<sup>29</sup> But what is thoroughly confusing, is that this 'Buddhism' has nothing to do with real Buddhism! It is a 'Buddhism' with a jealous Creator-God who is the great Judge, who punishes or forgives sins<sup>30</sup> and who is opposed to 'pagan idols'.<sup>31</sup>

Although this manuscript is introduced by the author as of Buddhist provenance, discovered by him in a Tibetan monastery,<sup>32</sup> there is only one conclusion possible for the student of comparative religion, namely that it is a forgery. One absolute condition for a manuscript having a stamp of genuineness is consistency between what it pretends to be and what it is. 'Issa' is the propagator of a Buddhism which does not exist. And the 'syncretism' described in it is, in fact, merely a mixture of Judaic and Christian motifs. This manuscript is, according to its contents, a scornful rejection of Buddhism. What it actually preaches is a slightly Cabbalistic Judaism.

The Notovitch story has been accepted by several new religious notables, for example, Manly P. Hall<sup>33</sup> and Elizabeth Clare Prophet.<sup>34</sup> Indian gurus advocate it, such as Yogananda of the Self-Realization Fellowship, Abheananda of the Ramakrishna Movement,<sup>35</sup> and

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 34 and Levi, *The Aquarian Gospel*, 59.

<sup>27</sup> Notovitch, *The Unknown Life*, 4.13.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 6.4.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 5.26.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 2.1.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 3.9.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., ch. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Hall, *The Mystical Christ*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Clare Prophet, *The Lost Years of Jesus: On the Discoveries of Notovitch, Abheananda, Roerich and Caspari* (Malibu, 1984).

<sup>35</sup> Swami Prajnanananda, *Christ the Saviour: and Christ Myth* (Calcutta, 1984), 126.

Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada of the Hare Krishna movement.<sup>36</sup> The most popular guru in today's India, Sathya Sai Baba, also acknowledges it; he claims to be the Godhead himself,<sup>37</sup> the one who sent Jesus – he has direct knowledge, he asserts, of Jesus' travels. Two of Sai Baba's foremost advocates in the West, Janet and Richard Bock, have produced a book, *The Jesus Mystery*, and a film, *The Lost Years*, on this subject, holding that Notovitch's theory is verified through the direct knowledge of other gurus, such as Sivananda and Chidananda.<sup>38</sup>

It is obvious, then, that this theory is today becoming widely-accepted among neo-Hindu movements. However, it was never mentioned in the theosophical writings of the late nineteenth century. Their explanation of the 'lost years' was the Essene theory. During the first half of this century a change has taken place. Sometimes combined with the Essene theory, the 'going-East' theory has gained increasing acceptance within occultism. This is mostly due to the occult-styled gospel of Levi. In addition to this, there are several spiritual revelations in our century which claim to confirm the Jesus 'going-East' theory. E. Cayce maintained that an Essene teacher sent Jesus to the East in order to study astrology. He even names the teachers in Persia, India and Egypt (which do not match with the names given by Levi). Cayce also refers to Jesus' initiation in Egypt.<sup>39</sup> But, as suggested above, all these different versions of the 'going-East' theory might be traced back to one single source, namely Nicholas Notovitch.

Rather similar to the *Aquarian Gospel* is the *Known and Unknown Life of Jesus the Christ* which explicitly refers to both Levi and Notovitch.<sup>40</sup> Astrological, numerical and magical viewpoints, reminiscent of Cabbalism, are very prominent here, and are applied systematically to the life of Jesus. It gives credit to Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry as those institutions which hold the truth of Jesus today. It also traces their origin back to an unidentified secret brotherhood of Sages at the time of Jesus.<sup>41</sup> According to this story,

Jesus, 'born as an Aries', stayed in Egypt till seven years of age, then in Nazareth until twelve years of age. After his victory over several temptations (especially from women) he went to Egypt, Persia, India, Tibet, China and back to Palestine. He then received the baptism in Jordan, after which he spent forty days of trance in the desert. Later he went to Egypt again, to China (learning astrology), Italy, Spain, Africa and Asia Minor. By soul travelling he also went to the remotest areas of the world, e.g. to the

<sup>36</sup> A.C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, *Christus – Christo – Krsna* (London, 1975).

<sup>37</sup> Sathya Sai Baba, *An Eastern View of Jesus Christ: Divine Discourses of Sathya Sai Baba* (London, 1982).

<sup>38</sup> Janet Bock, *The Jesus Mystery: Of Lost Years and Unknown Travels* (Los Angeles, 1980), 189.

<sup>39</sup> Furst, *Edgar Cayce's Story of Jesus*, 170.

<sup>40</sup> Jane Aikman Welch, *Known and Unknown Life of Jesus the Christ* (Chicago, 1924), 165.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 24, 36.

most northern peak of Norway, 'Nordkapp'. He also gathered four wise men 'from the ends of the earth', one from Africa, one from China, one (Indian) from America and one from Norway. Could the universality of the mission of the Christ be more fully expressed than was done here?<sup>42</sup>

A new religion of Japan, Mahikari, gaining increasing acceptance in the West, also advocates the 'going-East' theory in Japanese terms. Making reference to E. Cayce's prophecies and to a certain Japanese legend, 'kirisuto', Mahikari presents the following account of the life of Jesus as the most likely:

After having visited India and China, Jesus came to Japan at the age of twenty-one. He studied Shintoism for almost ten years. He then went back to Palestine in order to teach this wisdom. Jesus was never crucified, but a brother of his, named Isukiri, was. At the age of thirty seven Jesus came back to Japan, was married and had four children. More than a hundred years old he died, and his grave is located in Shingo of northern Japan. Thus, Jesus was a Japanese and his teaching was Mahikari.<sup>43</sup>

There certainly appears to be a profound need among the Eastern religions to own that Jesus is 'theirs'. Actually, he was an Asiatic (they say) – a gift from Asia to the West, which is in need of spiritual wisdom. This is the basic idea behind the guruism of the twentieth century and was an idea already mooted in 1893 at the famous World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago: 'The star rose in the East'.<sup>44</sup> Simultaneously, there is an urgent need for disintegrated modern man amid Western pluralism to gain a new conception of wholeness. It is possible to see the growth of the 'Jesus-going-East' theory in our century as a response to both of these needs. An employee at the Sathya Sai Baba Center in Hollywood explained it this way to me: 'Christ is universal, you see. He went to India. Baba tells this. Baba is over Jesus. I sent Jesus he says. Through Baba I have got a much greater view of Christ! He does not only belong to the Christians'. Jesus is 'theirs'.

It seems, in the merging of cultures of the modern world, that the Eastern need for legitimation and the Western need for wholeness are both reflected in the conception of 'Jesus-going-East'. They claim to have found a 'greater' Christ. This is *Christ syncretism*, 'Christ' as a principle of unification of the world's religions. This is summed up by guru Yogananda: 'God made Jesus Christ an Oriental in order to bring East and West together'.<sup>45</sup>

#### SPIRITUALIST CHANNELS

Spiritualism is inherent in most of the New Age religious movements.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 307–9.

<sup>43</sup> A.K. Tebecis, *Mahikari: Thank God for the Answers at Last* (Tokyo, 1982), 355.

<sup>44</sup> Vivekananda, *The Yogas*, 111, 193.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Bock, *The Jesus Mystery*, 141.

It was actually the strongest impulse behind the occult revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Out of a vast body of material I have selected a few examples of spiritualism which relate specifically to our main issue, the portrayal of Jesus.

In the late 1890s an English priest, Gideon Jasper Richard Ouseley, claimed to be in spiritualist contact with Swedenborg and others. These spirits transmitted to him the content of a secret manuscript, now hidden in Tibet, which tells the true story of Jesus.<sup>46</sup> It is called *The Gospel of the Holy Twelve*. An American edition from the Szekely movement (1978) uses the title *The Essene Human Gospel of Jesus*. Jesus is pictured as a prophet of the 'Father-Mother God'. He went Eastwards in his youth and preached the law. The essence of God's law is to care for animals and to follow a vegetarian diet. On his return to Palestine, Jesus was baptized by John. And 'there, in the form of a Dove, the Holy Christ descended'.<sup>47</sup> Jesus was a human who 'became' Christ. A peculiar combination of spiritualism and manuscript findings is here employed. Ouseley stressed the spiritualist aspect, maintaining that the spirits even provided the translation of the manuscript from Aramaic into English. Some later editors, however, have rejected the spiritualist theory, maintaining that Ouseley himself discovered the manuscripts in Tibet.<sup>48</sup> This gospel has not attracted very widespread attention outside Continental Europe. That is probably due to the fact that its authenticity was openly rejected by the early theosophists.

Most spiritualist channelings reveal the typical message about Christ in the New Age religions. 'Christ' is a principle, a state of consciousness. Christ is inherent in everyone but merely hidden by the 'sin of ignorance'.<sup>49</sup> Jesus should not be worshipped as a unique God. Rather, he was divine in a prototypical way. He is the 'I AM' godhead, and so is every human being.

Vicarious atonement is neither true nor necessary. . . And in that realization they will discover the only possible atonement, which is found in the meaning of that world rightly divided and set before them as the at-one-ment with the great Over-soul, your Father and my Father.<sup>50</sup>

This alternative interpretation of 'atonement', employed by Jung and several occult teachers, signifies most clearly what the new spiritual reinterpretation of Christ is all about.

The New Age religious movements react very strongly against the traditional Christian conception of salvation. On the one hand, they

<sup>46</sup> Per Beskow, *Fynd och fusk i bibelns värld: Om var tids Jesus-apokryfer* [*Findings and Forgeries of Biblical Narratives: Modern Apocrypha*] (Stockholm, 1979), 95.

<sup>47</sup> *The Essene Human Gospel of Jesus* (1978).

<sup>48</sup> Beskow, *Fynd och fusk*, 94.

<sup>49</sup> F.A. Wiggin, *The Living Jesus: The Words of Jesus of Nazareth* (Laporte, Indiana, 1921), 94.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

consider it simplistic; on the other, they regard it as a mockery of the dignity of human nature. This criticism reflects the holistic framework of New Age religious thought, in which man and God are one *by nature*. According to this view, salvation does not mean deliverance from guilt through the vicarious atonement provided by Jesus. What is needed is not reconciliation with God, but mere knowledge (gnosis) of man's own divine splendour. The crucial problem of human existence is not sin but ignorance. According to the holistic world-view there is, ultimately, no guilt to atone for. Man is perfect. But he needs to realize to experience his own 'at-one-ment', that is, his perfect one-ness with the Ultimate Divinity. This was demonstrated by Jesus when he attained 'Christ Consciousness'. The same state of being is attainable for every human being.

Most spiritualist authors who claimed that channelings have 'come through' from Jesus were originally speaking on their own behalf, not as representatives of any organization. They have had strong spiritual experiences, for example, a feeling of being periodically invaded by a strange person for whom they were, it seems, totally unprepared. The recipient of such a message usually does not find a traditional Christian congregation in which these experiences are regarded as legitimate. He is simply forced, then, to legitimate his experiences through the establishment of a new 'plausibility-structure', a new church, a new religion. Any 'strange experience' depends on a social framework of acceptance in order to keep its validity.<sup>51</sup> Thus, according to this pattern, new churches and small communities are today frequently being established throughout the world. A great number of the new religions owe their origin to some kind of spiritualist experience. Frequently, one of the spiritual personalities 'coming through' is Jesus, who strongly criticizes Christian dogma; and that implies, as we have seen, a most important legitimation of the New Age teaching *vis-à-vis* established society. For Jesus Christ, as we all know, is claimed as the supreme guarantor of established religion in Western society.

One might conclude, then, that the Aquarian portrait of 'Jesus the Christ' functions as a double legitimation for new religious movements. On the one hand, it justifies opposition against the established Church. On the other, it confirms the necessity and the plausibility of their own new spiritual movements.

<sup>51</sup> Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, 44.

