

## **Jesus in the Quantum Context**

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When we release Jesus from the chains of two thousand years of Christendom what might he begin to look like? Perhaps, St. Paul in the second letter to the Corinthians can pave the way for our reflections:

*From now onwards, therefore, we do not judge anyone by the standards of the flesh. Even if we did once know Christ in the flesh, that is not how we know him now. And for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old creation is gone, and now the new one is here. (2 Cor. 5:16-17)*

Already in his own lifetime, it seems that Paul was inviting people to regard Jesus differently from the prevailing norms of both personhood and creation. Individual personhood in the flesh was no longer adequate, but neither was the “old creation.” Christ’s coming on earth had altered the prevailing terms of reference. The new creation, what the Gospels call the Kingdom of God, augured changes so original and provocative that it has taken Christians - and humans in general - some two thousand years to catch up with them. Now we must reclaim the new horizon and learn to live by it!

The Gospels suggest that the following are some of the contextual elements that need to embroider a critical and credible Jesus story for our time:

### **1. Relatedness**

All the great religions grapple with the relationality of the divine, but none of them seems to get it right. The desire for power and control always gets in the way. The relationality of the divine is best gleaned, I suggest, by scrutinizing the capacity to relate that imbues the whole of creation. We detect this on the microcosmic scale in the quarks and leptons: they thrive through interrelating, not through Darwinian-type competition. We detect it again on the macro scale.

George Greenstein (1988) points out that configurations of three adorn the galactic and planetary spheres. Little wonder that humans began to envisage Trinity as an archetypal statement through which we discern the divine life force as fundamentally relational in nature.

I suspect that the understanding of God as a power-for-relationship is the oldest understanding of the divine known to human beings - predating formal religion by thousands, if not millions, of years. It is from that primitive, archetypal awareness that doctrines and dogmas of the Trinity eventually evolved.

Christian history and theology reduced our understanding of the Trinity into a type of mathematical quagmire, in which the separation and individuality of the three “persons” became more significant than their relatedness. Jesus tends to be located close to the Father God, unambiguously asserting domination rather than his interconnected relationship. We then end up with a relegation of the Creative Spirit as subservient to Jesus, despite the fact that the New Testament never declares that to be the case.

The Jesus for our time needs to be embedded once more in the trinitarian relational matrix. Jesus belongs to the realm in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts and should never have been expunged from it. Similarly, Jesus belongs to the whole of creation, which itself is the first and oldest creative expression of the divine creativity. How precisely the relatedness of Jesus differs from that of Father and Spirit may well be one of the most meaningless questions ever asked. The need for clear difference is a human patriarchal need, which I suspect is a major barrier to our primary God-given task of learning to befriend our relational God, striving to birth a more wholesome relationality throughout the length and breadth of creation.

### **2. Birthing**

Relationality describes something of the fundamental being of God and of God in Jesus. How do we describe the activity of God? Again, creation’s story suggests that birthing is a primary activity of the divine and one of the more dynamic metaphors to describe the divine at work in creation. Meister Eckhart captivated the notion beautifully when he posed the question “What does God do all day long?” to which he answered: “God lies on a maternity bed giving birth all day long” (quoted in Fox 2000, 41). Again,

creation is our great teacher here. In the birthing forth of God over several “billennia” we see a universe of prodigious and elegant creativity. And it is not without its paradoxes, reminding us that paradox, particularly that of the creation-destruction couplet, is written into the tapestry of creation at every level (see Q’Murchu 2002, 94-109). Yet the will-to-life, the potential for birthing always triumphs, and there is every reason to believe that it always will. This divine capacity for birthing new possibility led the peoples of Palaeolithic times to envisage God primarily as an erotic woman exuberant in her fertile energy. She came to be known as the great Earth Mother Goddess. Remnants of her once glorious reign still endure in human culture, especially among indigenous peoples (see Christ 1997). Despite the relentless efforts of patriarchal religion to demonize and eliminate her, she holds her place in the spiritual consciousness of the human soul and is likely to make a triumphant comeback in the opening decades of the twenty-first century.

The rediscovery of the great Goddess will be marked by a renewed appreciation and understanding of the sacredness of the earth itself and its ingenious capacity to survive and thrive despite all the manipulative destruction of the human species. Already theologians are connecting with the wise energy that infuses creation, religiously articulated in the wisdom traditions of several of the great religions and, for some, uniquely embodied in the Jesus of Christianity (e.g., Edwards 1995; Johnson 1992; Schussler Fiorenza 1994)

This is not a gender issue about whether the divine is male or female. This is about the human capacity and need to image God. Because we ourselves are also of a divine creation our images are likely to reflect something of the divine reality, assuming of course that we honor the divine at work in creation. Imagery around the maleness of God, with fatherhood as a primary attribution, and the divine tending to be reserved to the anthropocentric world is unlikely to be of God; it is largely, if not totally, based on projections of the dominant patriarchal culture of recent millennia.

God’s birthing forth, therefore, is more readily accessed through females than through males, while acknowledging that both genders contribute to the creative process of organic life. Birthing is very much a motherly energy - hence the image in several religious traditions of the woman fiercely protecting life whether in the soil or in the human. To this same end, Grace Jantzen (1998) reminds us that “redemption” comes not through mortality, with the emphasis on death and suffering but through natality, celebrating the birthing, flourishing, and growth of everything in creation.

### **3. Incarnational Time**

Because the primary activity of the divine is that of birthing forth, then the universe is saturated with life and endowed with abundance. It is there at the microscopic, quantum level, largely invisible to the human eye and almost totally inaccessible to scientific scrutiny. It becomes manifest through various channels of energy and movement and ultimately manifests in embodied forms of which the cosmos itself is the primary body and in turn cocreates with the divine to bring forth a vast range of other creatures, including human beings.

Consequently, the notion of embodiment does not apply just to humans. Creation is replete with a vast range of embodied expressions, dating back several billion years. Insofar as embodiment is a primary requisite for incarnation, then God has been incarnating within creation for several billion years. We need to rescue the notion of incarnation from the appalling minimalism to which we have condemned it.

We use the concept with a narrow, exclusively anthropocentric meaning, reserving it not just for humans, but for the select few that have populated planet Earth over the past two thousand years. But our God has been birthing forth life for time immemorial, and the divine solidarity with the human species dates back at least six million years. So, why all the reductionism? Why the blatant idolatry? Why not honor God’s time scale rather than the crude reductionism of recent millennia?

For Jesus, I suggest that time is archetypal rather than linear. Perhaps this is why the scriptures distinguish between *kairos* (sacred time) and *chronos* (linear, quantifiable time). In a sense Jesus belongs to the time-less realm; from within that context, assuredly, he can identify with our circumscribed sense of time, but as

the Jesus story unambiguously attests, Jesus is forever inviting us to transcend those narrow, stultifying boundaries. Unfortunately, Christendom identified these “time-less” horizons with “the world beyond” thus imposing their dysfunctional cosmology on the worldview of Jesus, which was significantly more elegant and embracing.

The rational human mind considers real only that which it can measure and quantify. The divine mind obviously works on different scale variations. Humans tend to stick rigidly to that which is observable and quantifiable. To one end of that spectrum is the microscopic sphere where the four-dimensional space-time continuum breaks down at those thresholds where we humans suspect that there are other time dimensions, but at this stage of our intelligence we are unable to decipher them. One tentative naming are the six to seven curled-up dimensions proposed by string theorists (see Green 2000). On the large macro scale, the four-dimensional space-time spectrum proves to be a good deal more useful, but now with the discovery of nonlocality, in which we know that things happen faster than the speed of light, this model is also proving to be inadequate.

I am not trying to argue that the missing time dimensions, which intuition tells us are there, can be used as proof for the existence of a divine mind. Arguments based on the need for rational proof belong to the patriarchal mind-set. That type of wisdom belongs to the past. The wisdom that engages us now, for which Jesus serves as an exemplary model, is something much more akin to the vision out of which quantum theory was born. It is the wisdom of the big picture that honors diversity, paradox, open-endedness, and mystery. This is the space in which our relationship with the divine, Christian and otherwise, stands the best hope of growing in wisdom and maturity.

#### **4. Discipleship (the Kingdom)**

The previous three notions - relatedness, birthing, and incarnation - weave into an original synthesis in the largely misunderstood rubric that was the primary focus in the life and ministry of Jesus. The Gospels refer to it as the Kingdom of God. Contemporary scholars, particularly women, find the language and imagery of royalty distasteful and reminiscent of oppression and patriarchal domination. Since Jesus clearly sought to transcend such manipulative power, it is puzzling that he should have stuck so closely to these condescending notions.

Jesus may have deliberately adopted and used the royal terminology as a strategy of subversiveness. All the Christian churches have sanitized Jesus, domesticating him in what could broadly be described as a well-behaved adult of middle-class culture. Respectability toward convention, order, and authority feature strongly in that culture. This leaves no room for the Jesus of the parables, who stretched all the conventional norms, broke many of the respected religious rules, and shocked people into a radical inclusiveness of partnership and reconciliation.

This was the disturbing, prophetic Jesus. This was the Jesus who set out to make all things new, thus at times demolishing quite mercilessly the norms and institutions that got in his way. Could it be that as Jesus flew in the face of all the royal, kingly standards, he re-appropriated their language and imagery, but now turned upside-down so that they were effectively not recognizable anymore? By retaining the kingly jargon, Jesus parodies the very dispensation he seeks to demolish. This is a poetic device frequently used in prophetic contestation (see further Funk 2002).

The “kingly” realm now belonged to a different power, not power over, but power with. John Dominic Crossan describes the Kingdom of God as a companionship of empowerment, in which people were liberated and empowered to birth forth new creative possibilities for that same creation in which the divine life force had been birthing since the dawn of time. No ruling classes anymore, no select favorites for the royal enclosures, no preferential treatment for those who came at the first hour. Equality reigns supreme, in the name of a love that gives unconditionally and invites all to the greatest challenge any of us could ever confront: to love unconditionally as we ourselves have been loved and liberated.

Discipleship now looks very different. It is no longer modeled on allegiance to some noble figure at the top. It is no longer a case of following humbly from behind. Mission in partnership is born, and it is not just collaboration among people but with everything and everybody in the New Reign of God's creation. Love is a key quality, but so is justice, because love without justice becomes sentimental and patronizing. Christian culture likes charity and is quick to admire and acknowledge the charitable person.

In parts of the planet we have been giving charity, with great generosity, for several decades, yet the poor remain poor and impoverished. Why? Because they know not the justice that would ensure that they too should have their rightful share. This is what makes the Kingdom of God so radically different: it is a strategy for practical change, not for pious platitudes. It is a vision for radical transformation, not a panacea for some utopia that keeps people forever hoping in vain.

There is an enormous sense of ambiguity about this vision of Jesus. Did Jesus himself fully grasp what it was all about? Probably not in all the details, and it looks as if he did not get the timing right. The Gospels suggest that he expected it to happen in his lifetime or shortly thereafter, but he was mistaken. What he did get right, however, is that his life and mission marked a profound cultural transformation, with planetary and global implications. The future would be different, while allowing that the radically new future can be realized only by those who adopt the discipleship of Jesus.

Scholars acknowledge this ambiguity in the portrayal of the Kingdom in the Christian Gospels, and I agree with those who see this as a positive rather than a negative feature. It honors the foundational humanity of Jesus, so essential to incarnational rootedness, and entrusts Christians with weighty responsibilities for the future development and evolution of the Jesus vision. Jesus provides a model, a deeply inspiring and challenging one, but one that remains radically incomplete apart from the Christa-community (Brock 1992) that constitutes the Jesus story at each moment in history, including the present one. The Jesus story is not closed; it remains radically open to the ongoing engagement and creativity of each new Christian generation. Among scripture scholars, Leander Keck (2000, esp. 88ff., 110ff.) provides a skilful treatment of these intricate issues.

### **Human Uniqueness**

In the quantum worldview, everything takes its identity from the context of its relationships and not from its self-referential separation or aloneness. As indicated frequently in chapter 1, even Jesus takes his identity from the context of his mission. In the Synoptic Gospels he never points the finger at himself, but always away from himself toward the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is the earthly name for the relational matrix from which Jesus takes his individual identity.

And with this adventure a whole new definition of what it means to be human comes to the fore. Gone forever is the lonely, isolated competitive individual, an identity that males adopt more readily because of cultural conditioning over at least five thousand years, but an appropriation many women find unfulfilling even to this day. As a species, none of us can embrace fully this identity, because it is not what we knew for most of the six million years we have been on this earth. For most of that time we were an egalitarian species, generically connected with the earth itself and much more benign and cooperative in our relation to all sentient beings.

There is a relational matrix out of which everything in creation is begotten, one important feature being the convergence elegantly described by Simon Conway Morris (2003). Theologically we call it the Trinity, not just the Christian "three persons in one" but an archetypal primordial capacity to co-create, to birth forth, to empower. Humans are born out of this matrix because the earth that brings us forth is itself born from it. The originating matrix is the source of all living reality, including that of the earthly Jesus. The difference between Jesus and ourselves is that Jesus was probably more consciously aware of this relational identity, whereas humans today, indoctrinated with patriarchal stratification, are largely unaware of their true identity.

It is through our capacity to relate that we become what our God wishes us to become. From a Christian point of view, Jesus serves as an archetypal model leading the way and inspiring us in our endeavors. Just as we ourselves have succumbed to the dissection of patriarchal manipulation, Jesus too has been its victim. The Christian churches have molded Jesus and his story into a caricature that would validate and justify their separatist philosophy. The conversion to a more relational mode of living is unlikely to be pioneered by major institutions - religious, political, or otherwise. That new orientation is likely to come from the ground up, from the groundswell of people gradually becoming disenchanted with the fragmenting culture of individualism. Despite the odds weighted against it, this breakthrough may happen much more quickly than any of us alive today can imagine.

### **Saved by Story**

In the history of the human race, storytelling is one of the oldest and most enduring methods of pedagogy (see chapter 1, n. 5). Even before we developed articulate speech we told stories, using the pre-verbal skills of hand and eye, gesture and symbol. And we told stories for a whole range of reasons, but basic to all was an innate search for meaning and purpose. Storytelling more than anything else knits together the fragmented aspects of existence and molds our reality into a comprehensive whole.

Stories are archetypal experiences in which strands of meaning coalesce. The speaker and the hearer are the collaborative agents for a process that liberates meaning. Stories function in a manner somewhat similar to a strange attractor in science, those computer simulations developed by modern scientists to illustrate how the experiences of life pull us toward focused meaning. Stories generate their own driving force, for which the storyteller becomes the creative agent, interdependently drawn forth by the creativity of the story hearer.

At every stage of our human existence the vital energy of the cosmos and the earthly dynamics of planet Earth weave the inner fabric of our being. Story releases what is unfolding in that complex landscape, adding coherence to the evolutionary search for meaning. The story will honor the larger picture and will enable us to discover, time and again, how our individual lives blend in with the relational matrix of cosmic and planetary reality.

Is there a place for God, or the divine, in this process? All the great religions couch their deep truths in stories passed on from messiahs and prophets, from sages and mystics, for example, the parables of the Christian Gospels. Yet, when it comes to major religious institutions like churches, allegiance is assessed not in terms of story-telling, or story listening, but in terms of laws, rules, procedures, and observances. God is often portrayed as an anthropocentric overlord, ruling by rational process as the rulers of this world do.

The religions have passed on sets of formalized stories we call scriptures. They are meant to illuminate the divine and its impact on our lives. But in several contemporary situations, these formalized narratives hide the spiritual appeal of the divine rather than reveal its true nature. What is often illuminated is the projected images of the leading religionists themselves, trying to cow people into submission, robbing people of the creative imagination and paralyzing people in a passivity that undermines both the capacity for speaking and hearing liberating stories.

An example comes to mind from the Christian scriptures (Acts 16:25ff.): Paul and Silas are imprisoned and, like all the other inmates, seem to be tied with chains. In the dark of night the whole building is rocked as if by an earthquake, the prison gate flings open and the prisoners' chains become detached from their moorings. The prison governor panics and is about to commit suicide, when Paul restrains him, reassuring him that all the prisoners have not escaped. In fact they are all quite content just to be in the midst of their new-found freedom.

From that juncture on (16:29), we never again here about the prisoners. All we hear about is Paul himself and his successful ordeals. Meanwhile, the richness and liberating grace of a wonderful story become totally subverted, and the potential for gospel freedom is seriously undermined and eroded. The writer is so

enthralled with exonerating the hero (Paul), that he loses sight of the gospel promise of liberation for the oppressed and imprisoned. A unique moment for hope-filled evangelism is virtually obliterated. Tragically, this is what patriarchal culture tends to do to the liberating praxis, the retrieval of which is a major preoccupation for the times in which we now live.

In contemporary Westernized culture, the dynamic of storytelling tends to be subverted. The powers that rule and govern our world cannot tolerate the open-ended nature of stories. They cannot include those who want to participate in the unfolding story, which gets translated into empty rhetorical categories called politics, economics, the hard sciences, and the social sciences. Everything gets reduced to a set of syllogisms, what Mark Jordan (2000) calls “a rhetoric of tedium,” serving a petrified, numbed culture where imagination and creativity are at an all-time low.

The Jesus story, too, needs to be liberated from the imprisonment of the petrified imagination. We need to articulate afresh who Christ might be for us today. Not the Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and forever but the one who befriends us as a Christian people grounded in the earth and at home in the cosmos. We need to salvage Christ from the forces of reductionism - religious, cultural, political - that have been extensively used over the past two thousand years of Christendom.

### **Postmodernism**

The reductionism continues unabated, with a new guise for each new time. Currently, one of its more alluring constructs is that of postmodernism, lauded by some as a new liberating movement and condemned by others for its fickleness and superficiality. Postmodernism claims that we have outgrown the age of the metanarrative, overarching governing stories that guide our way and inspire our lives. Such narratives are viewed as imperialistic, requiring everyone to follow a broadly similar set of views and behaviors, alien to the pluralism and diversity required for contemporary life. On the other hand, critics of postmodernism bemoan the clear-cut, centralized values, fearing that we are increasingly the victims of cultural fragmentation and meaningless relativism.

I wish to suggest that the postmodernist view is quite a distorted one that is not nearly as widespread as Westerners often assume. Both its proponents and its adversaries seem equally deluded. A few crucial elements need to be noted:

1. All the leading advocates of postmodernism are white, Western males, many of whom have spent their entire lives in sturdy academic institutions away from the real issues of daily life. Females rarely feature, and there is very little cross-cultural research.
2. The metanarrative perceived to be under threat is none other than the Western imperial worldview, which promoted colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and today is the driving force behind the belligerent marketeering and advertising of globalization.
3. It seems to me that this movement belongs originally to the upsurge of patriarchal domination some eight thousand years ago, ruthlessly committed to the philosophy of “divide and conquer.”
4. Mainstream religion adopted the same basic strategy, with each religion claiming to be the only valid metanarrative, not merely for its own cultural context (e.g., Hinduism for the Indian subcontinent) but for all humanity.
5. Intellectually, Greek culture became the ruling norm about three thousand years ago, prizing the rational, logical, deductive method over the mythological approach, which cherishes imagination and intuition. Rationalism and deductive proof characterize the patriarchal mind-set and the dominant culture down to our own time.
6. The attack by the opponents of postmodernism is fueled in large measure by a nostalgia for the unquestioned right to power that characterized all dominant institutions up to a few decades ago.
7. Positively understood, the multiplicity of ideas advocated by the postmodernist view exercise a purifying effect on all dogmas that have acquired an ideological status; this includes many of the major religions that flourish today. (More on this topic in Gallagher 1997, 88-91).

Contrary to the contention of postmodernists, it seems to me that several metanarratives thrive in our time. These include the new cosmology; the scientific view of quantum theory, a vast collation of data on alternative technologies, e.g., solar power; the jungian collective unconscious, highlighting the power of universal consciousness; the philosophy of networking; alternative approaches to health-care; multifaith dialogue. Alongside these emerging metanarratives, we need a Jesus story that is congruent with the archetypal yearnings of our time; that I will attempt in the final section of this book.

These contemporary metanarratives pose a threat to the prevailing culture - mainly for two reasons: (1) they offer understandings that are perceived to be so new that they leave little room for the old in any shape or form; (2) they incorporate levels of diversity and pluralism considered to be at variance with an authentic metanarrative. Generally speaking, dominant institutions will ensure that funding for research does not go into these enterprises, because then an alternative truth would be made transparent and that could spell ruination for the dominant powers.

What would a Jesus story look like in the context of these unfolding cultural narratives? All of them aim, to one degree or another, to rectify the dysfunctional relationships that humans have created vis-a-vis the web of cosmic and planetary life. All the movements listed above have the desire for right relationships at their core. This, too, is the central truth of the Kingdom that Jesus set out to establish, the New Reign of God at the heart of creation to which Christ-followers of every age are asked to commit their energy and creativity.

### **Finally: The Word Becomes Quantum!**

This book offers a new metanarrative on the life and ministry of Jesus. What makes it unique, and different from several other metanarratives, is the way it names and re-visions the issue of power. I set the story within the broad frame of the quantum worldview. One of the most revolutionary and baffling features of quantum theory is what its proponents call the collapse of the wave function. Broadly, it goes like this. The quantum visionary works primarily with a world of unlimited possibilities and believes that reality - at any level - can be honored only when all possibilities are entertained. Instead of monolithic power it seeks to honor the creative diversity through which empowerment flourishes.

When we opt for one or other outcome, or select one possibility from a range of others, we have collapsed the wave function. According to classical science, we have entered the world of reality - the domain of monolithic truth; according to quantum theory we have abandoned the world of reality, which thrives on creative diversity. In other words, in the quantum realm, the really real is where all things are possible; the unreal world is when we have to choose one or other option because as human creatures we are limited in our resourcefulness, and that is the best we can do in any one situation.

Every time therefore, we collapse the wave function - confer reality on one or other aspect of our experience - we need to remember that it is only a partial realization of a greater wisdom, perhaps one of inexhaustible wealth. What we should never do, therefore, is canonize or immortalize any one aspect of our experience, any one theory, dogma, or set of scriptures. Every time we do that, we alienate ourselves from our cosmic and planetary source; we disempower ourselves in a most destructive way. Tragically, that is what the classical worldview is always encouraging us to do!

The collapse of the wave function is a metaphor for our human predicament, a type of double-edged sword of serrating pain and piercing truthfulness. We can access truth but only in a very limited way - at least at this stage of our human evolution. The greater truth is always out of reach and will be revealed depending on our skill to evoke it. Probably only the mystics can evoke it on the type of larger scale that, mistakenly, the classical theorists think is impossible.

When, therefore, we engage with a particular aspect of formal religion, for example, the life of Jesus, the Buddha, or Krishna, we have collapsed the wave function. We are dealing with one particular rendition, limited by the cultural context of a particular time and place. If we dogmatize it, we are automatically catapulted into the world of idolatry. A quantum rendition of the story has to be different; and whenever,

and however, must strive to honor the world of all possibilities. This, too, applies to sacred stories as Richard Rohr (2004, 107) reminds us when he writes: “Sacred stories can always, and must always, be read on many levels to elicit their full transforming power.”

Jesus was a creature of quantum embrace. Having broken down the congested boundaries of his day, he left us with a legacy of unfinished business. We are the privileged ones who have inherited that legacy. Just as the great work of creation continues, so does the work of the New Reign that Jesus inaugurated. How do we embrace that challenge in our time? How do we salvage the tradition from the monopoly of patriarchal control? How do we retrieve the enduring truths from the rigidity of dogmatism? How do we reclaim the Jesus whose story we should never have closed in canonized scriptures or in denominational religion?

Perhaps one way to reclaim what has been lost and subverted is to invoke the creative imagination, precisely what Jesus did in his life and ministry. Let the Jesus story be told afresh. Let it be told by an imaginary Jesus of our time. Let's not fret about honoring the tradition because all that is best in what we have inherited is already there in the living tradition. In a sense, the scriptures reveal Jesus in the collapse of the wave function - a particular, historical, cultural rendition. On the other hand, the living tradition embodies the Jesus who is the catalyst for new possibilities.

The Jesus who proclaims and embodies the fullness of life, transcends all the structural contexts of history, whether literary or institutional. Jesus lives primarily in the organicity of creation itself, not just in the human heart but in all the pulsations of creation's heartbeat. It is that enlarged understanding of Jesus that seeks expression in the final section of this book, a narrative that, we hope, honors the Christ of yesterday, today, and every day - in the open-ended future of God's creation.