

Richard Rohr – Is His Teaching Biblical?

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This paper has been researched and written as a result of a deep concern over those Christian friends who have turned away from a more biblically based Christian faith to follow the teachings of Richard Rohr and the Center for Action and Contemplation. Many consider Rohr's teachings very attractive, like flashes of gold in the mundanities of life. He is often spoken of in glowing terms; and his following continues to grow, spreading through friendship groups and social media. However Rohr's use of biblical terminology and Christian sounding language is deceptive, lulling his readers into a false sense of security, whilst feeding them a mixed diet of mysticism, self-help spirituality, social justice, biblical inaccuracies and false doctrine. In this way the biblical faith of his followers is progressively and systematically undermined. Those who become more deeply embedded in his teaching have a demonstrated tendency to turn away from upholding Jesus Christ as Son of God and our only Lord and Saviour.

Richard Rohr's ideas and teaching seem to be continually evolving and also adapting in response to criticism – which makes it hard to arrive at his completely definitive answer on some subjects. I started this paper by thoroughly studying 2011 Rohr's teaching from his book *Falling Upwards*, before turning to some of his daily online meditations 2015-2017², in which he develops some key themes, which are touched on but not elaborated, in *Falling Upwards*. In this paper I have sought to examine some of the most significant themes in Rohr's teaching (notably 'dualism' and 'the Cosmic Christ' as well as his views on biblical authority, the deity of Jesus, atonement and the cross), I have then tried to give a more biblical perspective on these.

Before looking at the evidence in greater depth, I thought it might be helpful to summarise some of Rohr's ideas - using the questions addressed on the Alpha Course. As you will see, Rohr's ideas are somewhat controversial.

ALPHA QUESTION

RICHARD ROHR'S ANSWERS

Is There More To Life Than this?

Yes – you need to search for and find Your True Self!

Who is Jesus?

It depends if you mean Jesus of Nazareth or 'the Cosmic Christ' – because according to Rohr, these are two separate entities. Rohr believes that Jesus was 'a special Jew', a 'microcosmic moment in time', but that Jesus is

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² Rohr's online meditations can be accessed at <https://cac.org>

not the Cosmic Christ. Rohr believes that the Cosmic Christ is 'macrocosmic'; it is 'ever-growing' and is wherever 'matter and the spiritual coincide'. (Rohr does not consider Jesus Christ as Lord or that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the World).

Why did Jesus die?

Rohr adamantly rejects the penal substitutionary atonement of Jesus. Rohr considers Jesus' death to be 'tragic and absurd' but 'necessary to create Christianity' (the religion). Rohr considers that the purpose of the cross was to show us our 'tendency to scapegoat others', and that it was 'to reveal the lie and absurdity of the very notion and necessity of "sacrificial" religion itself.' Rohr tells us: 'nothing *changed* on Calvary, but *everything was revealed as God's suffering love* – so that we would change.'³

How can we Have Faith?

Rohr believes that faith needs to 'evolve'....

Why and How Do I Pray?

According to Rohr and his fellows, we need 'centering prayer'⁴ which largely involves meditation. Prayer is 'any interior journey or practise that allows you to experience faith, hope, and love within yourself.'⁵

Why and How Should I Read The Bible?

Rohr does not believe that the Bible is the Word of God – he discounts much of it as 'dualistic'. Instead he advocates that 'Scripture as validated by experience and experience as validated by Tradition are good scales for one's spiritual worldview'. 'Tradition' is not tradition of the church, but rather 'the perennial philosophy' which 'points to recurring themes and truths within all of the world's religions'⁶

³ See Rohr's daily meditation for Friday, February 12, 2016: 'Incarnation instead of Atonement' – accessed at <https://cac.org/incarnation-instead-of-atonement-2016-02-12/>

⁴ See the teaching of Rohr's colleague, Cynthia Bourgeault, on Centering Prayer for further details. A summary of this is available at <https://cac.org/centering-prayer-weekly-summary-2017-02-18/> Also see footnote 8 below.

⁵ See <https://cac.org/the-inner-witness-2017-02-07/>

⁶ See <https://cac.org/the-perennial-tradition-2015-12-20/>

How Does God Guide Us?	Rohr tells us that in ‘surrendering’, you can trust ‘that almost everything is a kind of guidance’. ⁷
What Does The Holy Spirit Do?	Rohr states that the Holy Spirit is female. He refers to the Holy Spirit as an ‘inner compass’ but also as a ‘force field’. According to Rohr the Holy Spirit seems to be linked to the ‘unified field’; and it keeps us in ‘the flow’, where our ‘True Self’ is.
How Can I Be Filled With the Holy Spirit?	Rohr believes that we do not need receive the Holy Spirit externally as we are already in ‘The Flow’. The question is therefore irrelevant.
How Can I Resist Evil?	Rohr considers that to make a distinction between good and evil is ‘dualistic’. Because Rohr considers ‘dualistic’ thinking to be the source of most violence in the world – we probably shouldn’t be asking this ‘dualistic’ question.
Why and How Should I Tell Others?	It rather depends what you want to tell them. To tell others the traditional Gospel message is inappropriate as there is no such thing as ‘in or out’; to speak of ‘in or out’ is ‘dualistic’. Rohr is a pluralist and a universalist; all paths lead to ‘God’ and there is nothing that we need to be saved from except possibly ourselves. It is good to spread Rohr’s teaching however but don’t be surprised if people spurn it – they are ‘immature’ and ‘dualistic’.
Does God Heal Today?	No comment on physical healing. Otherwise through the Twelve-Step programs. ⁸
What About the Church?	You may probably eventually be called to leave it in the same way that Jesus told us to leave our families.
How Can I Make the Most of the Rest Of My Life?	Sign up to Rohr’s daily meditations which you can easily do online through cac.org; buy Rohr’s books, read and listen to resources from the cac.org bookstore, join CAC’s conferences in New Mexico or watch online, watch

⁷ See <https://cac.org/trust-and-surrender-2017-03-07/> Surrender is to ‘a Trinitarian God’, ‘Trinity, the primal and ultimate Source’. I have not explained Rohr’s doctrine of Trinity in this paper as this has been done much more competently by the theologian Fred Sanders in his critical review of the Divine Dance – see page 25 of this paper.

⁸ See <https://cac.org/in-need-of-healing-2016-05-29/>

the CAC webcasts, or join one of Richard Rohr's online teaching courses and join the online community (available through the cac.org website). Later you can apply to join Rohr's 2-year Living School, part home/online & part Albuquerque based. Potential students must go through 'an intentional discernment process to assess your readiness'.⁹ By the end of all this, you are extremely likely to have lost all semblance of mainstream biblical faith.

Richard Rohr is a Franciscan Priest and an internationally known, speaker, prolific writer¹⁰ and retreat master. He describes his teachings as 'grounded in the Franciscan alternative orthodoxy – practices of contemplation and self-emptying, expressing itself in radical compassion, particularly for the socially marginalized'. He is the founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC) and academic Dean of the Living School for Action and Contemplation (part of the CAC), based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The vision of the CAC (available at <https://cac.org/about-cac/missionvision/>) is as follows: *'The Center for Action and Contemplation supports a new reformation – from the inside - * In the spirit of a Cosmic Christ * Confirming people's deeper spiritual intuitions * Encouraging actions of justice rooted in prayer¹¹ * With a new appreciation for, and cooperation with, other denominations, religions, and cultures'*.

Rohr is very controversial but he is currently extremely popular. His writings (and meditation techniques) are attractive to Christians from all backgrounds and denominations – those who are searching for a deeper intimacy with God and those who are in some way dissatisfied with their current spiritual lives. He appeals greatly to those in the 45+ age bracket; who in a time of mid-life crisis or watching loved ones die, are looking for a transcendent, mystical or deeper spiritual experience. There are however considerable problems with his teachings and methods.

My initial source of reference for this paper was Rohr's 2011 book, *Falling Upwards*¹²; the reason for this choice was two-fold, firstly I already had a copy in my bookshelf, and secondly because it is

⁹ See <https://cac.org/living-school/admissions/discernment-steps/> for details of discernment steps. See

¹⁰ Rohr's Wikipedia page lists him as the author of 30 books. WorldCat lists 474 works in 904 publications in 8 languages and 11,424 library holdings (see <https://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n90-634387/>). In addition, his daily reflections and meditations are sent out via the worldwide web to vast numbers of people.

¹¹ In this paper, I am not examining Rohr's views on prayer. However, the CAC's philosophy and practise of 'centering prayer' seems to be very attractive to Rohr's followers, as it introduces a mystical element that many find lacking in their spiritual lives. Rohr closes each of his daily online meditations with a 'Gateway to Silence'. The cac.org website provides teaching on how to set about 'centering prayer' and Rohr's colleague Cynthia Bourgeault, has recently published a book on the subject *The Heart of Centering Prayer – Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice* (2016) Shambhala, Boulder.

¹² Richard Rohr – *Falling Upwards* - published Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, California, 2011

probably his most widely read book to date¹³, containing details of some of Rohr's core beliefs whilst touching on others. Subsequently, because Rohr's teaching seems to evolve and develop over time, and also because their popularity, I have spent some time considering some of his more recent daily meditations.

Falling Upwards is an attractive looking book, the cover picture a type of 'Homes and Gardens' makeover of a monastic cloister! It is endorsed by Emerging Church¹⁴ theologian Brian MacLaren, depth psychologist & founder of Animas Valley institute Bill Plotkin, Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy, CAC colleagues Jim Finley & Cynthia Bourgeault and television personality Mehmet Oz. Rohr, who frequently reminds us of his Franciscan roots, writes in a poetical, non-linear, discursive and often chatty style. At times, his message seems deliberately obfuscated, as the book is interspersed with Christian terminology and bible references, alongside Greek mythology, frequent references to Zen, the Dalai Lama, Sufi-mysticism and Hinduism, and numerous authors, poets, philosophers, theologians and Christian saints. At first glance Rohr's writings often seem inspirational and compelling, with pithy soundbites that tap into our yearning for transcendence and acceptance, however with deeper examination and consideration they reveal a pluralistic and esoteric grounding and message that belong more to Zen Buddhism, Freudian and New Age thought than to a biblically based Christian doctrine. Any who enjoy Rohr's works should also read the Vatican document: *Jesus Christ The Bearer of the Water of Life – A Christian Reflection on the 'New Age'*¹⁵; this provides an easy to read explanation of the New Age, and how it differs from Christian doctrine.

Rohr's thesis, as set out in *Falling Upwards* is the following:

The Second Half of Life

Using a phrase popularized by the Swiss founder of analytical psychology, Carl Jung, Rohr asserts that there are two halves to life.¹⁶ The first half of life is about 'finding the starting gate....the raft but not the shore'.¹⁷ This half is defined by rules and structure; it is where we build a strong identity and become good citizens; it is where our 'loyal soldier'¹⁸ is formed. The first half of life is a necessary

¹³ Worldcat.org lists it as the most widely held work by Richard Rohr; it is held by 780 WorldCat member libraries worldwide with 19 editions published between 2010 and 2013

¹⁴ For more information on the Emerging Church, see *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* by DA Carson, published Zondervan, Michigan, 2005.

¹⁵ *Jesus Christ The Bearer of the Water of Life – A Christian Reflection on the 'New Age'*. Available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_20030203_new-age_en.html (accessed 25/11/16)

¹⁶ *Falling Upwards* - chapter 1 - page 8

¹⁷ *Falling Upwards* – preface – the invitation to the further journey page viii

¹⁸ Rohr uses terminology developed by Bill Plotkin, founder of Animas Valley Institute, who describes 4 facets of the Self; North, South, East and West. 'The Loyal Soldier' is the 'North' subpersonality: the 'Nurturing Generative Adult'; this subpersonality tries 'to keep us safe by inciting us to act small, to act beneath our potential or one-dimensionally, so that we might secure a place of belonging in the world. They help us secure such a place by avoiding risk and rendering us non-threatening, useful, or pleasing to others or by urging us into positions of immature, dominator power over others.' (see <http://www.wildmindbook.com/author-interview-with-bill-plotkin/>) *Falling Upwards* – chapter 3 – page 43f

preparation for the second half of life. Around the age of 35-55¹⁹ we experience a deeper calling, a second calling.²⁰ Many are too set in the first half of life to hear and respond to this calling; but Rohr says 'if you stay in the protected first half of life beyond its natural period, you become a well-disguised narcissist or an adult infant (who is also a narcissist)'.²¹ Rohr believes that it is this second calling that is our destiny and the real purpose of our lives. It is a call to discharge our 'loyal soldier' with its safe framework of rules and belonging and search for our 'True Self'. To do so may 'feel like a loss of faith or loss of self. But it is only the death of the false self, and is very often the birth of the soul.'²²

Rohr tells us that it is only by discharging our 'loyal soldier' that we are able to find 'authentic inner authority, or what Jeremiah promised as "the law written in your heart" (Jer 31:33)'. Rohr misses the point however. These verses are not about some higher wisdom, but about knowing the Lord, and the New Covenant which God makes with His people and which finds its fulfilment in Jesus. (see Luke 22:20, Hebrews 8 & 10). Rohr is also at odds with the Bible, in his assertion that there are two halves of life. In the Bible we can see that there are no typical ages at which a person may respond to the call of God, some do so very young (eg David), others around the age of 30 (eg the disciples), others in late life (eg Abraham and Moses). In the New Testament, we see that the only call that really counts is the call to follow Jesus and become his disciples; in the bible there is no deeper second calling to search for the True Self.

The Search for the True Self

Rohr writes that the True Self, which is 'our soul, our deepest identity.....our unique blueprint.... our unique bit of heaven', was installed in us at the beginning by God, 'at our own "immaculate conception"'.²³ Rohr tells us 'the Zen masters call it "the face you had before you were born". This self cannot die and always lives'²⁴; but it has become hidden and we find it through wisdom, transcendence and 'shadow work'. Rohr believes the soul awakens naturally if we can learn how to 'stay out of the way of this natural growing and awakening'; this is what Rohr understands by the

¹⁹ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 3 – page 49 - Rohr writes: "Our loyal soldier normally begins to be discharged somewhere between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-five, if it happens at all; before that it is usually mere rebellion or iconoclasm".

²⁰ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 2 – page 17f. Rohr writes about the Odysseus and Joseph Campbell (the American mythologist and writer whose magnum opus 'The Hero with a Thousand Faces' discusses his theory of the archetypal hero found in world mythologies) and the concept of the "monomyth of the hero"; he uses these to say that we need to embark on a further journey. On pages 22-23, he refers to the call of Abraham (Gen 12:1), and Jesus calling the disciples (Matt 4:22) to back up his concept of the vital necessity of answering a second call. On page 21, this seems to refer to this as a call to leave our own 'personal "salvation project" as Thomas Merton called it' and 'get out and about into the real and bigger issues'. If Rohr is correct in his thesis that we all need to answer a second call, then the first call of Jesus, in which he calls us into relationship and to become his disciples, seems relatively unimportant to Rohr.

²¹ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 3 – page 26 - Rather scathing, but useful invective which can be lobbed at any who disagree with Rohr's thesis! To add to his case, Rohr writes (page 45) that Jesus himself judges 'first stage religion'; Rohr considers that the 'loyal soldier' is similar to the older son in the parable of the prodigal son, and the Pharisee in the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

²² *Falling Upwards* – chapter 3 – page 49-50

²³ *Falling upwards* – preface – the invitation to the further journey page ix

²⁴ *Falling upwards* – chapter 11 – page 130

terms 'conversion' and 'repentance'.²⁵ 'We are created with an *inner drive and necessity* that sends all of us looking for our True Self whether we know it or not. This journey is a spiral, and never a straight line'²⁶ 'To stay on the surface' and not embark on the search for the True Self is the 'shape of evil'; sin is 'superficiality and blindness'.²⁷ It is only through finding our True Self that we become whole; thus if we don't find our True Self, 'we never get to our little bit of heaven....and we have created our own "hell"'.²⁸ Rohr suggests that the failure to discover the True Self is what almost all religions mean by the term 'hell', its discovery is thus 'heaven'.²⁹

This thesis is essentially a New Age, Esoteric philosophy (from the Greek *esoteros*, meaning 'that which is from within'). The Vatican document, *Jesus Christ the bearer of the Water of Life – a Christian reflection on the New Age*³⁰, defines esotericism as generally referring 'to an ancient and hidden body of knowledge available only to initiated groups, who portray themselves as guardians of the truths hidden from the majority of humankind. The initiation process takes people from a merely external, superficial, knowledge of reality to the inner truth and, in the process, awakens their consciousness at a deeper level. People are invited to undertake this "inner journey" to discover the "divine spark" within them. Salvation, in this context coincides with a discovery of the Self'. The same document also tells us 'In what might be termed a classic *New Age* account, people are born with a divine spark, in a sense which is reminiscent of ancient Gnosticism; this links them into the unity of the Whole. So they are seen as essentially divine, although they participate in this cosmic divinity at different levels of consciousness. We are co-creators, and we create our own reality.'³¹ The more we examine Rohr's works, particularly his views on 'the Cosmic Christ',³² the more we are able to see Rohr's close alignment with New Age thought.

Rohr's thesis does not comply with biblical Christianity. His notion of the True Self is at odds with the doctrine of Original Sin. The Christian view is that God created mankind in His own image, to be in relationship with Him; but at The Fall, mankind rebelled (sinned) against God and by doing so, God's image in us was distorted or marred. It is only through the Cross of Jesus Christ, through His death and resurrection, for us and in our place, that mankind can be justified (made right with God), redeemed (brought back into relationship with God) and sanctified, where through the Holy Spirit at work in us, God's image is restored in us. Yet Rohr would say that by asserting this and other core

²⁵ *Falling upwards* – preface – the invitation to the further journey page x

²⁶ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 7 – page 94 – Rohr's statement that the journey is a spiral and never a straight line is reflective of Buddhist thought (Judeo Christian western thought is more linear, eastern thought is more cyclical (eg death and resurrection linear - reincarnation cyclical). In Buddhism spirals are a sacred symbol reminding us of our evolving journey in life. Carl Jung is alleged to have said 'the spiral is an archetypal symbol that represents cosmic force'. There is a lot on the internet on this subject!

²⁷ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 7 – page 95

²⁸ *Falling Upwards* – preface – the invitation to the further journey page xi -xii

²⁹ *Falling Upwards* – preface – the invitation to the further journey page ix

³⁰ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_20030203_new-age_en.html section 7.2 (accessed 25/11/16)

³¹ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_20030203_new-age_en.html section 2.3.4. (accessed 25/11/16)

³² See below - page 16f

biblical doctrines, it is because we are stuck in the ‘loyal soldier’ mode; ‘stunted and limited’³³, ‘truncated’³⁴, repeating inherited formulae, and concerned only to stay in the safety of our closed group rather than set out on the journey to find our True Self!

Dualism – Traditional view v Rohr’s view

In his writings, Rohr redefines our thinking on a number of crucial issues. His reworking and re-labelling of the term ‘dualism’ and his subsequent, strong, and repeated condemnation of this, seems central and foundational to the rest of his thinking.

In *Falling Upwards*, Rohr does not give a very clear explanation of what he means by the term ‘dualism’ although he repeatedly refers to it. He introduces the theme of ‘dualism’ in his introduction, when he tells us that ‘the merely rational mind is invariably dualistic, and divides the field of almost every moment between what it can presently understand and what it deems “wrong” or untrue’.³⁵ In chapter 3, Rohr tells us that ‘our Western dualistic minds do not process paradoxes very well’; he says that he has seen ‘many Jews, Hindus and Buddhists do it much better, but very few Christians have been taught how to live both law and freedom at the same time’; we are better at ‘rushing to judgement’³⁶ This gives the impression that Rohr’s notion of dualism is to do with a distinction between, and judgement of, good and evil. This impression is reinforced in Rohr’s recent meditation *Dualistic and Non-dualistic Thinking – The Dualistic Mind* – Sunday, January 29, 2017. Here he tells us that ‘dualistic thinking’ is ‘our way of reading reality from the position of our small self’. He tells us that ‘the dualistic mind is essentially binary, either/or thinking. It knows by comparison, opposition, and differentiation.’³⁷

The Concise Oxford Dictionary³⁸ defines dualism as a theory recognising two independent principles (mind & matter, good & evil in the universe, two personalities in Christ). Chambers Dictionary³⁹ defines it as that view which seeks to explain the world by the assumption of two radically independent and absolute elements – eg (1) the doctrine of the entire separation of spirit and matter, thus being opposed to both idealism and materialism, (2) the doctrine of two distinct principles of good and evil, or of two distinct divine beings of these characters.

³³ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 3 – page 44

³⁴ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 3 – page 45

³⁵ *Falling Upwards* – introduction – page xxxi (Rohr adds a footnote reference to another of his books ‘The Naked Now – learning to see as the mystics see’, which presumably develops the point more fully – I have not yet read this.

³⁶ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 3 – page 36 Rohr says rather that we need a contemplative mind ‘to hold creative tensions’ – this is the ‘way of wisdom’ [Collins dictionary defines ‘creative tension’ as ‘a situation where disagreement or discord ultimately gives rise to better ideas or outcomes’. For a more interesting treatment of the subject see article by Cardinal Timothy Dolan at Catholic Education Resource Center – which can be accessed at

<http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/religion-and-philosophy/other-topics/creative-tensions.html>

³⁷ Richard Rohr: *Dualistic and Nondual Thinking - The Dualistic Mind* – Sunday, January 29, 2017. Available at <https://cac.org/the-dualistic-mind-2017-01-29/>

³⁸ 3rd edition – published 1934

³⁹ 1929 reprint of original 1901 edition

In Western religious thought, 'dualism', is traditionally understood as the erroneous⁴⁰ belief that there are two, equally balanced, opposite powers in the universe: good and evil. This is dualism of Taoism (Yin and Yang) and of Manichaeism⁴¹ and Gnosticism⁴². However, although Rohr strongly and repeatedly condemns and rejects 'dualism'; his notion that 'your "sin" and your gift are two sides of the same coin'⁴³ seems to support more Taoist notions of dualism; that all things exist as inseparable and contradictory opposites. Furthermore, this also contradicts the biblical message. Jesus said: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12) and St John in his first epistle (written to combat Gnostic teachings circulating at the time) writes: "God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth" (1John 1:5b-8).

In *Falling Upwards* there are hints that Rohr's redefinition of dualism comes from Eastern religious thought, although Rohr does not explicitly tell us that this is the case. There are however a few clues that indicate the roots of his thinking. He repeatedly mentions 'the unified field'; this seems to be a reference to the eastern belief that all consciousness, matter and energy are One and that the unified consciousness that is the source of the universe radiates out as energy waves of different frequencies, which manifest in different ways.⁴⁴ Rohr also asserts that we 'now know' that 'the

⁴⁰ Erroneous because this would imply that the devil is not a created being and is as powerful as God; thus in this view, God would not be creator of all and Lord of all.

⁴¹ Manichaeism – a cult that was active in the time of St Augustine. Manichaeans were followers of the Persian prophet Manes, who was martyred by the Romans. They believed in two eternal and equally powerful forces of good and evil locked in endless combat. They attributed evil to matter and good to spirit – believing that the human soul or spirit was a spark of the good power that had been stolen by evil forces and trapped in matter [see *The Story of Christian Theology* by Roger Olson (1999), IVP - pages 257-265]. St Augustine, who was attracted by Manichaeism before his conversion, tackled these issues in his writings. To Augustine, a man is not a soul imprisoned in a body to be understood as evil and needing severe ascetic treatment to suppress it, but rather a whole, soul and body. In *City of God (book 14)*, he argues that the cause of sin arises in the soul, not the flesh and that the corruption of the body which weighs down the soul was not the cause of the first sin, but its punishment for it was the sinful soul that made the flesh corruptible. Furthermore, the natural state of man, created good but spoiled by sin, could only be restored by its Creator – it is only through Jesus that we can be saved and liberated (see St. Augustine - *City of God* 14:11).

⁴² Roger Olson in *The Story of Christian Theology* chapter 1 summarises the heretical, second and third century, Gnostic belief as follows. "They believed that matter, including the body, is inherently a limiting prison or even evil drag on the good soul or spirit of the human person and that the spirit is essentially divine – a "spark of God" dwelling in the tomb of the body. For all of the Gnostics, salvation meant achieving a special kind of knowledge not generally known or even available to ordinary Christians. That *gnosis*, or knowledge, involved awareness of the true heavenly origin of the spirit within, its essential divine nature as an offshoot of God's own being, and Christ as an immaterial, spiritual messenger sent down from the unknown and unknowable God to rescue and bring home the stray sparks of his own being which become trapped in material bodies. They all agreed that Christ did not actually become incarnate as Jesus but only appeared to be human." You will probably notice the parallels between this and Rohr's own teaching.

⁴³ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 4 page 61 Consider also 1 John 3:5-6 "But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No-one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No-one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work."

⁴⁴ Shakti Interspiritual centre website has an article on The Unified Field of Consciousness. This tells us that to the Eastern mind, that there is a unified field of consciousness is the perennial, primordial truth of the universe; western minds however, can find it 'mind-blowing'. It also informs us that the ancient eastern scriptures say that all consciousness, matter and energy are One and that the unified consciousness that is the source of the universe radiates out as energy waves of different frequencies, which in turn manifest as subtle and gross forms. This gives the appearance of solid, separate persons and objects, but all are in fact emanations of the one underlying universal consciousness.'

universe really is “inspired matter” and ‘is not merely inert’⁴⁵. This seems to be a reference to the Gaia hypothesis⁴⁶ and also indicates that Rohr holds to a monist viewpoint, whereby everything can be explained in terms of a single reality or substance.

Rohr writes that it is through ongoing evolution in our universe that ‘finally God is allowed to be fully incarnate, which was supposed to be Christianity’s big trump card from the beginning’.⁴⁷ It is worth noting that not only does this statement underline Rohr’s monist view that there is only one basic substance as the ground of reality and that there is no distinction or duality between God and the world; but also in this statement, the incarnation of Jesus Christ is effectively denied – if God is only finally allowed to be fully incarnate now, the implication is that God was not fully incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Alongside his reshaping of our ideas about dualism, Rohr strongly and repeatedly condemns the ‘dualism’ and ‘dualistic thought’ that he has redefined, and he also judges and condemns those who do not conform to his own ‘non-dualistic’ way of thinking. Rohr writes: ‘here is the normal sequencing of the dualistic mind: it *compares*, it *competes*, it *conflicts*, it *conspires*, it *condemns*, it *cancels out contrary evidence*, and then it *crucifies with impunity*. You can call it the seven C’s of delusion and the source of most violence, which is invariably *sacralized* as good and necessary to ‘make the world safe for democracy’ or to ‘save souls for heaven’.⁴⁸ This seems very inconsistent of him, but it has parallels to the intolerance of those who preach tolerance and the absolutism of those who preach relativism!

Rohr’s views on the authority of Scripture and how he uses the bible

In *Falling Upwards*, Rohr dismisses the Old Testament with the statement: ‘The Jewish Scriptures, which are full of anecdotes of destiny, failure, sin and grace, offer almost no self-evident philosophical or theological conclusions that are always true’.⁴⁹ By rejecting and relativizing the Old Testament in this way, Rohr is better able to dismiss more biblically orthodox Christian doctrine (see below). However whilst dismissing or discounting much of the Bible, he also has a tendency to use biblical quotes to substantiate his theses.

In order to understand Rohr’s use of the Bible in support of his theories, it is useful to understand his views on the authority of scripture generally. The first Theme of Rohr’s Living School states

Further on in *Falling Upwards* – chapter 6 – page 75, Rohr says that he uses ‘Einstein’s term “unified field” to describe that single world of elementary forces, principles, and particles that he assumed held together the entire universe of space-time.’

⁴⁵ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 7 – page 93

⁴⁶ See Wikipedia – Gaia hypothesis

⁴⁷ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 7 – page 93

⁴⁸ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 12 – page 147 (italics his)

⁴⁹ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 4 - page 62. Rohr gives a footnote at this point in which he quotes Walter Brueggemann – *Theology of the Old Testament* “Israel’s religion, and thus the texts, are incessantly pluralistic.”

‘Scripture as validated by experience, and experience as validated by Tradition are good scales for one’s spiritual worldview (METHODOLOGY).’⁵⁰ In other words Rohr does not consider Scripture as the inspired word of God, or absolute truth, rather something that is subject to our own interpretation, validation, and experience (‘Tradition’ in this context is not the tradition of the church as we would normally expect, rather it is ‘the perennial philosophy’ which ‘points to recurring themes and truths within all of the world’s religions’⁵¹; in other words it is a wider pluralistic tradition that incorporates teachings from native Indian spirituality, native and Celtic spirituality, Buddhism, Hinduism and Jungian thought).⁵²

In his daily meditation for Thursday 24th December 2015, entitled *Interpreting Scripture (Wisdom Lineage Summary)* Rohr is explicit regarding how he interprets scripture. He tells us ‘I attempt to interpret scripture as I see that Jesus did.....It is rather clear in Jesus’ usage that not all scriptures are created equal. He consistently ignored or even denied exclusionary, punitive and triumphalist texts in his own Jewish scriptures in favour of passages that emphasized inclusion, mercy and honesty.....He knew which passages were creating a highway for God and which passages were merely cultural, self-serving, paranoid, tribal, and legalistic additions.’⁵³ Rohr thus dismisses any Old Testament passages that he doesn’t like as ‘cultural, self-serving, tribal and legalistic additions’, not ‘the word of God’. In doing so he disregards the words of Jesus, when he tells us (in Matthew 5:17-18) “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.” Obviously in the New Testament we see Jesus quoting only from selected passages (as opposed to every single passage!) in the Jewish Scriptures (the Old Testament), but there is no evidence to back up Rohr’s claim that Jesus ‘consistently ignored or even denied’ any part of Scripture at all. Jesus quotes Scripture when he was tempted by the devil during his forty days in the wilderness; and we see that he regarded all Scripture as the word of God “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” (Matthew 4:4). Jesus not only used scripture in his teaching and in his living but he also fulfilled over 300 prophecies from the Old Testament through his birth, life, death. Jesus had an extremely high view of all of the Old Testament; there is absolutely nothing in the teaching or life of Jesus that backs up Rohr’s opinion that he denied any of it.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Lineage and Themes of Rohr’s Living School available at <https://cac.org/living-school/program-details/lineage-and-themes/>

⁵¹ See <https://cac.org/the-perennial-tradition-2015-12-20/>

⁵² See list of Rohr’s Wisdom Lineage also available at <https://cac.org/living-school/program-details/lineage-and-themes/>

⁵³ Richard Rohr, OFM - *Wisdom Lineage Summary – Interpreting Scripture* – Thursday, December 24, 2015 – available at <https://cac.org/interpreting-scripture-2015-12-24/>

⁵⁴ In a more recent meditation, *Scripture – Our Tricycle for Forward Movement* - Monday, January 9, 2017 – available at <https://cac.org/tricycle-forward-movement-2017-01-09/> Rohr writes ‘I believe that Jesus only quoted those Scriptures that he could validate by his own experience..... If we can verify that at least some holy people and orthodox teachers (Tradition), and some solid Scripture also validates our own experiences, we can be more confident that we are in *the force field of the Holy Spirit* and participating in God’s sacred work in this world’. Here Rohr further underlines his view that only certain selected and scriptures are really relevant for us; thus it would seem that all scripture can be considered subjective rather than objective.

In the same meditation (Interpreting Scripture – Thursday, December 24, 2015) Rohr also casts doubt on the veracity of the New Testament. He writes: ‘The New Testament was written in Greek – a language which Jesus did not understand – and was composed thirty to seventy years after Jesus’ death. We can conclude that the exact words of Jesus were apparently not that important for the Holy Spirit or for us. We have only a few snippets of Jesus’ actual words in his native Aramaic. This should keep us all humble and searching for our own experience of the Risen Christ instead of arguing over Greek verbs and tenses.’⁵⁵ By asserting that the Holy Spirit didn’t think that Jesus’ actual words were particularly important; Rohr tells us that we are free to interpret and adapt, or disregard them, as we feel fit. In this way Rohr again downgrades and devalues the bible, elevating experience over it; in his own words ‘scripture as validated by [our] experience’. Taking this approach to scripture leaves his followers in an uncertain position in which they are left unsure as to which scriptures they can trust and which they should ignore.

Rohr’s explanation of his approach to the Bible helps us to understand why, throughout *Falling Upwards*⁵⁶, he has a tendency to take bible verses out of context and use them to support and add a Christian flavour to his more esoteric beliefs and pluralistic suppositions.⁵⁷ A particularly clear example of this is Rohr’s use of the bible in justifying his condemnation of what he considers as ‘dualism’. In stating his belief that Jesus ‘was the first non-dualistic religious thinker in the West’, Rohr writes, ‘Listen to his dangerous and inclusionary thinking: ‘My Father’s sun shines on the good and the bad, his rain falls on the just and the unjust’ (Matt 5:45). Or ‘Don’t pull out the weeds or you might pull out the wheat along with it. Let the weeds and the wheat both grow together until the harvest’ (Matt 13:29-30). If I had presented such fuzzy thinking in my moral theology class, I would have gotten an F!’⁵⁸

In this passage, it is noteworthy that apart from seeming to accuse Jesus of having ‘fuzzy thinking’, Rohr completely neglects to mention Jesus’ explanation of this parable in Matthew 13:36-43; to do this would totally undermine Rohr’s viewpoint. In Matthew 13:36-43 we read: “Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, “Explain the parable of the weeds in the field”. He answered, “The one who sowed the seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everyone who causes sin and

⁵⁵ Richard Rohr, OFM - *Wisdom Lineage Summary – Interpreting Scripture* – Thursday, December 24, 2015 – available at <https://cac.org/interpreting-scripture-2015-12-24/>

⁵⁶ Although this is a recurrent feature of his writing generally

⁵⁷ For example: his incomplete and inaccurate discussion of the giving of the law (page xxviii *Falling Upwards*) and his use of Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:20 to substantiate Freud’s theory of the two drives that coincide and conflict within the individual and among individuals ‘eros’ life energy, and ‘thanatos’ death energy. This interpretation ignores the preceding 5 verses which show us that Jesus is actually talking about false prophets and how to recognise them (page xiv *Falling Upwards*).

⁵⁸ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 12 - page 149

all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.” We can see from this that Jesus clearly distinguishes between good and evil and also between ‘the sons of the kingdom’ and ‘the sons of the evil one’. Furthermore, as we read through the Gospels, we repeatedly see that Jesus distinguishes between good and evil, not only in his teaching but also in his actions: casting out demons and forgiving sins.

Rohr’s views on Sin and Salvation

Rohr’s reworking and subsequent rejection of the term ‘dualism’ is fundamental to his thesis and as such necessitates further redefinitions. Rohr redefines sin as ‘*superficiality* and blindness’ and staying ‘on the *surface*’⁵⁹ (italics his), moreover because of his belief that we are already in the Trinity⁶⁰, salvation is not the biblical concept of being saved from our sins and being partakers of eternal life through Jesus death and resurrection. Instead, according to Rohr, salvation is variously defined as a ‘narcissistic fix from the Top’ (an idea which seems to come from the Hindu concept of ‘darshan’ see footnote below)⁶¹; ‘sin turned on its head and used in our favor’⁶²; and being saved from “yourself” (your false self).⁶³ This latter is done by us through ‘Shadow work’⁶⁴, – the Enneagram being Rohr’s preferred means of achieving this⁶⁵, thus the onus of salvation falls on us.⁶⁶ Although as Rohr does not believe in the biblical concept of judgement or hell⁶⁷, there doesn’t seem to be any need to be saved from anything anyway, other than possibly ourselves!

The Cross of Jesus Christ – Rohr’s view and how it differs from the mainstream

⁵⁹ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 7 – page 95

⁶⁰ *Falling Upwards* – preface – page xi - ‘There is nothing to join, only something to recognize, suffer, and enjoy as a participant. You are already in the *eternal flow* that Christians would call the divine life of the Trinity’.

⁶¹ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 1 - page 5 Rohr seems to take this idea from the Hindu concept of ‘*darshan*’ (or *darshana/daršana/darshanam*) which is an auspicious sight of a holy person which bestows merit on the person who is seen. Rohr refers to this a ‘narcissistic fix’, however narcissism is the pursuit of gratification from vanity or egoistic admiration of one’s own attributes; an obsession with ‘me, myself and I’. Surely Rohr’s definition of salvation turns the biblical notion of salvation completely on its head. The first question in the Westminster Catechism asks ‘What is the chief end of man?’ to which the answer is given ‘man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever’ (1Cor 10:31, Rev4:11, Psalm 73:25-26). It seems to be that Rohr’s concept of salvation reverses this along these lines: ‘what is the chief end of God? God’s chief end is to glorify man and enjoy him forever’.

⁶² *Falling Upwards* – chapter 4 - page 60 – slightly confusing as we aren’t told which definition of sin we should be using here.

⁶³ *Falling Upwards* –chapter 11 - page 132

⁶⁴ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 11 - page 130 .

⁶⁵ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 4 – page 60/61 and also page 131.

⁶⁶ I will not dwell on the Enneagram here – there are many concerns with it – see Vatican document: Jesus Christ – the bearer of the water of life (details above) and for more detailed information please read the following article available at <http://www.equip.org/article/tell-me-who-i-am-o-enneagram>

⁶⁷ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 3 – page 49 Rohr writes: ‘The world mythologies all point to places like Hades, Sheol, hell, purgatory, the realm of the dead. *Maybe these are not so much the alternative to heaven as the necessary path to heaven.*’

Rohr considers that ‘theologically and objectively speaking, we are already in union with God’⁶⁸ and that the ‘only workable meaning of any remaining notion of “original sin” is that ‘we grow spiritually much more by doing it wrong than by doing it right’⁶⁹; the implication of this view is that because we are ‘already in union with God’, the death and resurrection of Jesus are irrelevant in terms of bringing us back into relationship with God.

Rohr is explicit in his rejection of the doctrine of the penal substitutionary atonement of Jesus (i.e. that God the Father sent His Son Jesus to die in our place, thus paying the penalty for our sin, that we might be forgiven). He writes ‘Many Christians even made the cross into a mechanical “substitutionary atonement theory” to fit into their quid pro quo worldview, instead of suffering its inherent tragedy, as Jesus did himself’. To this he adds: ‘Jesus did not need to change the mind of God about humanity, but he came to change the mind of humanity about God. Ours was a Cosmic Christ from all eternity who revealed the eternal love of God on the cross, but God did not need any ‘payment’ to love us.’⁷⁰

Rohr repeats and expands this view in his other writings; see for example Rohr’s article from his daily meditation, ‘*Alternative Orthodoxy – Incarnation instead of Atonement*’, Week 1 Friday, February 12, 2016. In this article Rohr considers substitutionary atonement as a ‘theory’ which ‘creates a nonsensical theological notion that is very hard to defend’. He asks: ‘How and why would God need a ‘blood sacrifice’ before God could love what God had created? Is God that needy, unfree, unloving, rule-bound, and unable to forgive?’.... Rohr asserts that ‘Jesus was precisely the “once and for all” (Hebrews 7:27) sacrifice given to reveal the lie and absurdity of the very notion and necessity of “sacrificial” religion itself.’ Rohr also asserts that ‘nothing *changed* on Calvary, but *everything was revealed as God’s suffering love* – so that we would change.’⁷¹

However, Rohr seems to confuse love and forgiveness. The biblical view is that the cross of Jesus Christ *demonstrates* God’s love for us; the Cross reveals the how much we are loved. It is true that ‘God didn’t need any payment to love us’, the ‘payment’ is precisely because God does loves us; it is God himself who pays - it is only through Jesus death on the cross in our place that we can be forgiven. The cross shows us the seriousness of sin, and the holiness and love of God. God is Holy, for us to be close to God, sin cannot be ignored - it contaminates - it needs to be dealt with. Wonderfully, in the Old Testament, God was present with His people, in the Tabernacle and later in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. In the wilderness wanderings, we are told that any unauthorised person who went near the Tabernacle was killed⁷² and the reason why the purity of the camp was so important because God Himself was resident with His people⁷³. In the Temple in Jerusalem, the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, once a year on the Day of Atonement, and “never without blood”⁷⁴

⁶⁸ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 1 – page 12

⁶⁹ *Falling Upwards* – introduction – page xxii

⁷⁰ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 5 – page 68 – see also Rohr’s footnote page 172:

⁷¹ Full article can be accessed at <https://cac.org/incarnation-instead-of-atonement-2016-02-12/>

⁷² Numbers 1:51,53. Numbers 3:10, 38.

⁷³ Numbers 5:3

⁷⁴ Hebrews 9:7 - see also Leviticus 16 for the day of Atonement.

because “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness”⁷⁵. The animals’ blood could not itself atone for, or take away sin⁷⁶, it was only effective because the entire Old Testament sacrificial system pointed forward to Jesus’ death on the Cross. The Law and the sacrificial system were a shadow or pointer of what was to come; “by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy.”⁷⁷

Rohr asks ‘How and why would God need a ‘blood sacrifice’ before God could love what God had created? Is God that needy, unfree, unloving, rule-bound, and unable to forgive?’⁷⁸ However the sacrificial system does not undermine the love of God, instead it underlines it. If God is not Holy; then sin is not a problem, if God is not Holy, atonement is not necessary. If God did not love us passionately and completely, he would not have provided the means for atonement. The Bible tells us that God is Holy; we are not, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”, but that we are “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.”⁷⁹ To suggest that atonement is unnecessary, because God could absorb our sins and welcome us without any difficulty on his part, is unbiblical as it doesn’t recognise either the Holiness of God or the seriousness and consequence of our sin; if God were merely to absorb our sin would mar his Holiness; and the Cross of Christ would then be superfluous.

Mark’s Gospel tells us is how when Jesus died, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom”.⁸⁰ This curtain was the one that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple. It was about 30 feet high, as thick as the span of a man’s hand and made from a single piece of fabric. Yet, at the moment of Jesus death, it ripped in half from top to bottom because Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29) – through Jesus’s sacrificial death on the cross, God himself removes the dividing barrier.

However, *Rohr’s rejects this central Christian doctrine*. His stance is that whilst Christians made the ‘suffering of Jesus into God’s attempt to solve some cosmic problem – which God had largely created to begin with’, he takes the view that the cross was really about suffering.⁸¹ This is more meaningful to Rohr, who ‘considers Buddhism.. much more observant than Christianity’ in the idea that suffering ‘reveals the constant problem that we are to ourselves, and opens up new spaces within us for learning and loving’. To this he adds ‘the cross solved our problem by first revealing our real problem

⁷⁵ Hebrews 9:22

⁷⁶ Hebrews 10:3 “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

⁷⁷ Hebrews 10: 14

⁷⁸ See above

⁷⁹ Romans 3:23-25a.

⁸⁰ Mark 15:37-38

⁸¹ This idea is also underlined in the ‘1st Core Principle’ of Center for Action and Contemplation; where we are told that the core meaning of the Jesus’ crucifixion is his ‘solidarity with suffering’. See <https://cac.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/1-STANDING-WITH-JESUS>

– our universal pattern of scapegoating and sacrificing others.’⁸² Rohr considers Jesus’ death on the cross to be ‘tragic and absurd’⁸³, although conceding that ‘the death and resurrection of Jesus are necessary to create Christianity’⁸⁴. Whilst this latter statement might seem affirming, it belongs more to a pluralistic worldview where the death and resurrection of Jesus are seen as necessary to create a religion rather than being God’s means of salvation for the world. In Rohr’s opinion Jesus is not the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6); thus by implication, neither is he the Son of God.

God the Father

There is no biblical sense of salvation in *Falling Upwards*; neither is there any sense of the holiness of God. Because Rohr does not consider the cross to be about the penal substitutionary atonement of Jesus, forgiveness also needs to be reworked. Thus Rohr states: “Every time God forgives us, God is saying that God’s own rules do not matter as much as the relationship that God wants to create with you”⁸⁵. Rohr’s theology of forgiveness is that God loves us too much not to forgive us. But if God’s rules don’t matter then he cannot be truly holy, in which case we need to abandon much of the Old Testament; which as seen above, Rohr seems quite happy to do.

Rohr’s view of God is very ambiguous. Although he talks a lot of about love and wisdom, *Falling Upwards* seems to be about the search for and revealing of the god within, Rohr gives a number of euphemisms for God: “the Light” (p 132); “the Friend” (p 156); “the Real” (p95), “Divine Mirror” (p 158); “The Great Divine Gaze” (p 159); “Real Guide” (p 66); “Ultimate Source” (p 68); “the Great Life” (p 43); “a Larger Source” (p 99); “the unified field” (p 99); “the shared Spirit” (p 99)⁸⁶. He tells us that ‘each generation has to make its own discoveries of Spirit for itself’⁸⁷, but this statement immediately raises the question of what Spirit he is alluding to; the word ‘Holy’ is conspicuous by its absence. We should note that this type of language for God is a common feature of New Age thought.

Jesus and ‘the Cosmic Christ’

In *Falling Upwards*, Rohr refers to Jesus quite freely; although having devalued Jesus’ death on the cross, so that it merely shows us who we are, and Jesus’ solidarity with suffering; Jesus seems to be relegated to the position of a teacher or guru. Rohr writes that he ‘still’ considers Jesus to be ‘the spiritual authority of the Western world’ and that ‘Jesus is seeing at a much higher level than most of us’⁸⁸. Rohr writes that he is ‘convinced that Jesus’ ability to find a higher order inside constant disorder is at the very heart of his message.....Jesus found and named the unified field beneath all

⁸² *Falling Upwards* – chapter 5 – page 68-69 – the idea of ‘scapegoating’ probably comes from the Freud’s idea that in order for civilisations to become coherent, they channel their aggression towards scapegoats. [Freud: Civilisation and its Discontents]

⁸³ *Falling Upwards* – introduction – page xxiv

⁸⁴ *Falling Upwards* – introduction – page xix

⁸⁵ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 4 - page 57 (italics his)

⁸⁶ While these euphemisms might sound rather lovely and give us different aspects of God that we can dwell on; the God of the Bible is personal, He is not an impersonal force.

⁸⁷ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 1 - page 3 This comes early in the book and immediately begs the question ‘What Spirit are you alluding to?’ The word ‘Holy’ is conspicuous by its absence.

⁸⁸ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 6 – page 81

contradictions⁸⁹. Rohr considers this important because ‘if we do not find that unified field, “our complex and inexplicable caring for each other”, or what Buddhists call the Great Compassion, there is no healing to life’s inconsistencies and contradictions⁹⁰ ... In other places, Rohr refers to ‘the Cosmic Christ’: ‘I want to propose that we are both sent and drawn by the same Force, which is precisely what Christians mean when they say the Cosmic Christ is both alpha and omega⁹¹; Rohr’s view of the Cosmic Christ tends to be more akin to a ‘force’ rather than Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, our Lord.⁹²

This all sounds rather confusing. Reading *Falling Upwards* alone, it is hard to understand what Rohr means by the term ‘Cosmic Christ’; however some of his more recent meditations are more explicit. In Rohr’s meditation from Sunday, March 22, 2015 - *Moving from Jesus to Christ*, while citing Peter’s words at Pentecost as evidence, Rohr tells us that ‘Jesus and Christ are not the same; Christ is the much larger and older frame. The three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are mostly talking about Jesus, the historical figure who healed and taught. Paul never met the historical Jesus and hardly ever quotes Jesus directly. In almost all of Paul’s preaching and writing, he is talking about the Eternal Christ Mystery, rather than Jesus of Nazareth⁹³.

Rohr reiterates this opinion in his meditation *The Cosmic Christ: week 2 – Sunday October 30, 2016*. Here he tells us that ‘a study of Scripture, Tradition, and the experience of many mystics reveals a much larger, broader and deeper meaning to “the Christ”. Frankly it is a metaphysical concept more than a religious one’ and then restates his idea that ‘the three Synoptic Gospels are largely talking about Jesus, the historical figure who healed and taught and lived in human history; whereas John’s Gospel presents the trans-historical “Christ”.... among the four Gospels, we have both Jesus and Christ.....Paul also never met the historical Jesus and hardly ever quotes Jesus directly. In almost all of Paul’s preaching and writing, he is referring to the Eternal Christ Mystery or the Risen Christ rather than Jesus of Nazareth before his death and resurrection⁹⁴ . .

To make such a distinction between ‘Jesus, the historical figure who healed and taught and lived in human history’ and ‘the trans-historical “Christ”’ is completely arbitrary and unbiblical. Alister McGrath referring to Karl Barth’s statement in *Church Dogmatics* that ‘from its beginning to end, the Bible directs us to the name of Jesus Christ’; tells us that ‘a central element of Christian theology centers upon the idea of a revelatory presence of God in Christ. Jesus Christ is regarded as making God known in a particular and specific manner, distinctive to Christianity’ and that ‘the acknowledgement that “Jesus Christ is Lord” (Romans 10:9) appears to have become one of the

⁸⁹ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 4 – page 59

⁹⁰ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 4 – page 59

⁹¹ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 7 – page 89

⁹² See first part of the the Apostles Creed: I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.....”

⁹³ Richard Rohr: *Jesus: The Christ - Moving from Jesus to Christ* – Sunday, March 22, 2015. Available at <https://cac.org/moving-jesus-christ-2015-03-22/>

⁹⁴ Richard Rohr: *The Cosmic Christ: Week 2 – The Second coming of Christ* – Sunday, October 30, 2016. Available at <https://cac.org/second-coming-christ-2016-10-30/>

earliest Christian confessions of faith, serving to distinguish those who believed in Jesus from those who did not⁹⁵. Mainstream Christian belief is that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour, to make a distinction between Jesus and the Cosmic Christ denies that Jesus Christ is Lord, and denies that he is the Saviour of the world.

Rohr asserts that ‘the three Synoptic Gospels are largely talking about Jesus, the historical figure who healed and taught and lived in human history; whereas John’s Gospel presents the trans-historical “Christ”⁹⁶. But this does not square even remotely with the biblical account. For instance, Luke records the angels, when announcing the good news to the shepherds, as saying: “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you: he is Christ the Lord.”⁹⁷ Commenting on the last of these two verses -Luke 2:11, G.K.Beale and D.A.Carson⁹⁸ tell us that not only is Jesus introduced here as the Saviour (*sōter*), a title which most often applies to God⁹⁹, but also that this is the only place in the New Testament where the two titles *christos kyrios* (Christ, the Lord) appear together without a conjunction; and that prior to this verse in Luke, the word *kyrios* is most often used to refer to God himself (Luke 1:6,9,11,15,16,17,28,32,46,76). In other words, Luke, one of the synoptic Gospel writers, clearly considers Jesus to be not only ‘the historical figure who healed and taught and lived in human history’, but also the long awaited Christ (Messiah, the anointed one), and the Lord and Saviour, in other words God incarnate.

Towards the end of his Gospel (Luke 24: 13-27), Luke records how, on the day of the resurrection, two of Jesus’ disciples were walking to Emmaus and discussing what had happened, when “Jesus himself came up and walked along with them”¹⁰⁰, he asked them what they were discussing, to which they answered “Jesus of Nazareth... he was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people”¹⁰¹. They told him how Jesus had been sentenced to death, crucified, but that they “had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel”¹⁰², and that now his body had gone and some angels had said he was alive. Then we read that “He [Jesus] said to them, ‘How foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets had spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer all these things and then enter his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”¹⁰³ From these verses we understand that not only did Jesus regard the Old Testament scriptures as entirely relevant, and that Luke regarded Jesus and the Christ to be one and the same, but also that Jesus clearly viewed himself

⁹⁵ Alister McGrath: *Christian Theology: an introduction* – chapter 9 the doctrine of the person of Christ page 279.

⁹⁶ Richard Rohr: *The Cosmic Christ: Week 2 – The Second coming of Christ* – Sunday, October 30, 2016. Available at <https://cac.org/second-coming-christ-2016-10-30/>

⁹⁷ Luke 2:10-11

⁹⁸ G.K.Beale and D.A.Carson *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament* (2007) – page 267-268

⁹⁹ Luke 1:47, Deuteronomy 32:15, Isaiah 12:2, Isaiah 17:10, Isaiah 45:15&21.

¹⁰⁰ Luke 24:15

¹⁰¹ Luke 24:19

¹⁰² Luke 24:21

¹⁰³ Luke 24:25-27

as the Christ, and that suffering was an essential part of this; Jesus death by crucifixion rather than being 'tragic and absurd'¹⁰⁴, was God's plan for the redemption and salvation of mankind.

It is also clear that Paul regarded Jesus and the Christ to be one and the same. In Acts 9:22 we read how shortly after his conversion and being prayed for by Ananais, Paul "grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ". Then in Acts 17:2-3 we are told, "As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,' he said". Furthermore, Paul, in speaking of Jesus, tells us in Philippians 2:8-11, "And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Rohr's assertion that in his preaching and writing, Paul 'is referring to the Eternal Christ Mystery or the Risen Christ rather than Jesus of Nazareth before his death and resurrection'¹⁰⁵ is completely fallacious.

In spite of the clear biblical message that Jesus Christ is Lord, Rohr states as fact, his belief that Jesus of Nazareth is not the same as 'the Cosmic Christ'. In explaining the difference, he tells us that 'Christ is a word for the macrocosm, Jesus is the microcosmic moment in time'¹⁰⁶; 'Jesus is the union of human and divine in space and time, and the Christ is the eternal union of matter and Spirit from the beginning of time'¹⁰⁷. In other words it seems that Rohr sees Jesus as finite whereas 'the Christ' is more infinite.

In considering the term: 'Cosmic Christ', it is helpful if we remember that word 'Christ' (*christos*), is Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word *mēšīah* (*Messiah*) - both mean 'the anointed one'. Were Rohr and other New Age proponents to use the non-alliterative and arguably less mystical term 'Cosmic Messiah', maybe we would not be so easily deceived. The word 'Christ' (*christos*) does not of itself imply divinity any more than the word 'Messiah' does. N.T.Wright writes 'in case there is anyone left who has not grasped this point, the word 'Messiah', within Jesus' world, does not refer, in itself, to a divine or quasi-divine figure. There are puzzling and opaque texts in the Hebrew scriptures which speak of the king as one speaks of Israel's god. There are passages where the roles of YHWH and of the king seem to be intertwined. But there is no evidence to suggest that the various messianic and quasi-messianic figures who flit through the pages of first-century history thought of themselves, or were thought by others in this fashion. So, when Peter says to Jesus 'You are the Messiah' and when Caiaphas says the same words but as an ironic question, neither of them should be understood as

¹⁰⁴ *Falling Upwards* – introduction – page xxiv

¹⁰⁵ Richard Rohr: *The Cosmic Christ: Week 2 – The Second coming of Christ* – Sunday, October 30, 2016. Available at <https://cac.org/second-coming-christ-2016-10-30/>

¹⁰⁶ Richard Rohr: *Jesus: The Christ - Moving from Jesus to Christ* – Sunday, March 22, 2015. Available at <https://cac.org/moving-jesus-christ-2015-03-22/>

¹⁰⁷ Richard Rohr: *The Cosmic Christ: Week 1 summary* – Saturday, October 29, 2016. Available at <https://cac.org/cosmic-christ-week-1-summary-2016-10-29/>

either stating or asking whether Jesus thinks he is the incarnate second person of the Trinity.¹⁰⁸ To separate the Greek term 'Christ' (and its Hebrew equivalent 'Messiah'), from its Old Testament expectations, even without the associated coupling with the term 'cosmic', is likely to result in confusion.

To Rohr, Christology (the person of Christ) and Soteriology (the work of Christ) is not about Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Rather he has a completely different view which involves 'the Cosmic Christ' being seen as a 'blueprint' or 'pattern' that is able to be infinitely repeated in space and time. In his meditation *The Cosmic Christ: Week 1 – The Blueprint*, Monday, October 24, 2016, Rohr tells us that 'the great universal Christ mystery since the beginning of time ... becomes specific in the body and the person of Jesus'. But that this was a 'blueprint'. In his supposed justification of this, Rohr takes John's words from the prologue to his Gospel, John 1:1-1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning"; and, informing us that 'it's really the same meaning', he substitutes "blueprint" for Word (*Logos*). Rohr thus rewrites John 1:1 as 'In the beginning was the Blueprint, and the Blueprint was with God....And all things came to be through this inner plan.' Ignoring John 1:2 that "He [ie Jesus] was with God in the beginning", Rohr also rewrites John 1:3, to read 'No one thing came to be except through this Blueprint and plan. All that came to be had life in him.' In the same meditation Rohr tells us that 'John is describing a bigger life, a bigger light, from which we all draw. This is Consciousness – a pre-existent form that is eternal or one light.... So, the true light, Consciousness, or Love itself precedes and connects and feeds all of our smaller lights and attractions.'¹⁰⁹

Rohr's ideas here seem to be typical of New Age proponents; the Vatican document *Jesus Christ The Bearer of the Water of Life – A Christian Reflection on the 'New Age'* tells us that 'For New Age the Cosmic Christ is seen as a pattern which can be repeated in many people, places and times; it is the bearer of an enormous paradigm shift; it is ultimately a potential within us'.¹¹⁰

By propounding a notion of 'blueprint', rather than the creative and sustaining Word (*Logos*) of God, Rohr lays the foundation for the idea of 'The Ever Expanding "Christ" Mystery' and his belief that 'whenever the material and the spiritual coincide, there is the Christ. Jesus fully accepted that human-divine identity and walked into history. Henceforth, the Christ "comes again" whenever we are able to see the spiritual and the material coexisting, in any moment, in any event, and in any person'.¹¹¹ Rohr believes that we 'are here to fulfil Christ...you are part of this movement of an ever-growing Cosmic Christ.'¹¹² Again, this is unbiblical. In Colossians 2:9-10, Paul writes "For in Christ all

¹⁰⁸ N.T.Wright: *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996) – page 477-478

¹⁰⁹ Richard Rohr: *The Cosmic Christ: Week 1 – The Blueprint* – Monday, October 24, 2016. Available at <https://cac.org/the-blueprint-2016-10-24/>

¹¹⁰ *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life – A Christian reflection on the New Age* – 3.3 The Cosmic Christ. Available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_20030203_new-age_en.html

¹¹¹ Richard Rohr: *The Cosmic Christ: Week 2 – The Second coming of Christ* – Sunday, October 30, 2016. Available at <https://cac.org/second-coming-christ-2016-10-30/>

¹¹² Richard Rohr: *The Cosmic Christ: Week 2 summary* – Saturday, November 5, 2016. Available at <https://cac.org/cosmic-christ-week-2-summary-2016-11-05/>

the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the Head over every power and authority". The biblical understanding is not, as Rohr asserts, that we 'are here to fulfil Christ', but rather that He, Jesus Christ, is God incarnate and that we are given fullness in Him; Jesus Christ the Lord.

Having separated Jesus and 'the Cosmic Christ', Rohr tells us that in order for Christians to grow, we need to love the two distinct entities that are Jesus and the Christ; in his meditation *The Cosmic Christ: Bigger than Christianity*, Monday, October 31, 2016, he writes: 'you might begin with one or the other, but eventually you should be drawn to both. Too many Christians have started and stopped with Jesus, never coming to know the Universal Christ. Many who are not Christian have started with the Christ by some other name –after all, there is only One God, One Love. I have met Hindus and Jews who have lived happily and fruitfully inside this hidden Christ Mystery, and I have met many Roman Catholics and Protestants who are running away from any notion of an all-pervading, loving Presence. Their stinginess and exclusivity gives it away.'¹¹³

However, Jesus and Christ are not two separate entities. Jesus of Nazareth is not 'a special Jew' who was 'Christ' in a 'microcosmic moment', rather this same Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One, He is Son of God, He is Son of Man, He is the Word (Logos) made flesh, He is Immanuel - God with us, He is Lord of all and "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:9-10)

In his meditation, *The Cosmic Christ – week 1: Abstract to Personal – Wednesday, October 26, 2016 –* Rohr gives us a diagram of two triangles, with the top one is inverted. He uses this diagram to explain his concept of 'The Cosmic Christ' and he tells us that it is 'an attempt to show the big picture of our growing, evolving understanding of God and the various forms God takes to reveal the mystery to us'¹¹⁴ The inverted top triangle has three 'ideas of God': at the top 'Trinitarian God The Pre Existent Christ (Colossians 1:15-30)'; below this 'Eternal Wisdom/Sophia – the divine feminine'; below this 'Creation – image and likeness'. At the cross-over point between the triangles the name 'Jesus' is written in large letters, with the caption 'The microcosmic moment'. Below this, in the second (not-inverted) triangle we read 'Death and Resurrection'; below this, 'Ascension – the two world become one'; below this 'The Christ – whenever the spiritual and the material coexist'; and finally at the bottom, 'The Ever Expanding "Christ" Mystery – (Romans 8:19-25)'. In his explanation, Rohr tells us that 'Jesus of Nazareth is the microcosm of the macrocosm', an 'archetypal, prototypal figure of a corporate personality' and that 'Jesus reveals the whole pattern of creation and human history in condensed form. Perhaps he is best seen as a Map!'¹¹⁵ At a cursory glance, these words of Rohr may seem to elevate Jesus to his rightful position as Lord and God, but in actual fact the

¹¹³ Richard Rohr: *The Cosmic Christ: Week 2 – Bigger than Christianity* – Monday, October 30, 2016. Available at <https://cac.org/bigger-than-christianity-2016-10-31/>

¹¹⁴ Richard Rohr: *The Cosmic Christ: Week 1 – Abstract to Personal* – Wednesday, October 26, 2016. Available at <https://cac.org/abstract-to-personal-2016-10-26/>

¹¹⁵ Richard Rohr: *The Cosmic Christ: Week 1 – Abstract to Personal* – Wednesday, October 26, 2016. Available at <https://cac.org/abstract-to-personal-2016-10-26/>

terminology Rohr uses for Jesus - ‘map’, ‘pattern’, ‘prototypal’, ‘archetypal’, ‘blueprint’ reveal that his focus is more on ‘the Ever Expanding ‘Christ’ Mystery.’

In his meditation *The Cosmic Christ – week 1: Summary – Sunday, October 28, 2016*, Rohr invites us to create a ‘Mandala’ which is ‘a Hindu or Buddhist symbol of the universe. It represents the Whole of which we are a part’¹¹⁶. Rohr tells us that ‘we might think of Christ as a mandala – a symbol of matter and spirit cohering in and beyond time. Christ is God manifest, both visible and invisible, darkness and light....Each of us is part of this pattern’.¹¹⁷ In his meditation *The Christification of the Universe – Sunday, November 6, 2016*, Rohr adds ‘Christ invests himself organically within all creation, immersing himself in all things, in the heart of the matter, and thus unifying the world. The universe is physically impregnated to the very core of its matter by the influence of his superhuman nature. Everything is physically “christified”, gathered up by the incarnate Word as nourishment that assimilates, transforms and divinizes.’¹¹⁸ Again, although initially sounding good, this is profoundly unbiblical; Jesus is not a monist coherence of ‘matter and spirit’, he is not creation and matter ‘immersed’ and ‘impregnated’, rather He himself is creator; the living Word, God incarnate, fully God and fully man; he is not ‘darkness and light’, but only light, as John tells us, “God is light, in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5b)

In his meditation, *Baking the Cake from the Bottom Up*, Monday, January 2, 2017; Rohr writes ‘We also need to understand that the original Incarnation happened over thirteen billion years ago with what we now call the “Big Bang”. This is when God materialized and the universe began. This is the Cosmic Christ, which is a category much larger than Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth, who came 2,000 years ago, is the revelation of the pattern that is true everywhere and always. All notions of time fall apart. Christ is a code word for everything God created – with the added message that materiality funnels Spirit into the universe...Matter and spirit can never be seen as separate, once you encounter the Christ Mystery. Christ is not just the code word for many of us, but also the code breaker as to the nature of the universe’¹¹⁹.

This is also erroneous, as the implication is that God is synonymous with the world and that there was a time when He was not. God revealed His name to Moses as “I AM” (Exodus 3: 14) - God is – there was never a time when God was not. The Psalmist echoes this, Psalm 90:2 tells us ‘Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world from everlasting to everlasting you are God’. God did not ‘materialize’ with the Big Bang, as Rohr asserts; God has no beginning and no end – he is outside the realm of time. God is also not synonymous with the material world. God created the world; the first words of the Bible Genesis 1:1 tell us, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”. Earlier in this paper, Rohr’s monist views in *Falling Upwards*, were

¹¹⁶ Richard Rohr: *The Cosmic Christ: Week 1 – Summary – Saturday, October 29, 2016*. Available at <https://cac.org/cosmic-christ-week-1-summary-2016-10-29/>

¹¹⁷ Richard Rohr: *The Cosmic Christ: Week 1 – Summary – Saturday, October 29, 2016*. Available at <https://cac.org/cosmic-christ-week-1-summary-2016-10-29/>

¹¹⁸ Richard Rohr: *The Christification of the Universe – Sunday, November 6, 2016*. Available at <https://cac.org/the-christification-of-the-universe-2016-11-06/>

¹¹⁹ Richard Rohr: *From the Bottom Up: Introduction – Baking the Cake from the Bottom Up – Monday, January 2, 2017*. Available at <https://cac.org/baking-the-cake-from-the-bottom-up-2017-01-02/>

discussed; his notion that ‘the original Incarnation happened over thirteen billion years ago with what we now call the “Big Bang”’ is a re-statement of his belief that there is only one basic substance as the ground of reality, that there is no distinction or duality between God and the world, that ‘the universe really is “inspired matter”’.¹²⁰

Rohr’s views on The Holy Spirit

Rohr’s view of the Holy Spirit is also at odds with Scripture. In his introduction, Rohr states his belief that we are already participants, ‘already in the *eternal flow* that Christians would call the divine life of the Trinity’.¹²¹ He expands on this in chapter 7, saying firstly that ‘the Holy Spirit is that aspect of God that works largely from within and “secretly”, at “the deepest levels of our desiring”’, but he adds that ‘more than anything else, the Spirit keeps us connected and safely inside an already existing flow, if we but allow it.’¹²² It is Rohr’s belief that we are already in the ‘flow’. Because Rohr does not believe in the biblical concepts of original sin, the holiness of God, redemption, atonement or judgement, no mention is made in this book that the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin and righteousness and judgement (John 16:8-11). Furthermore, Rohr’s notion of the Holy Spirit seems not so much as the third person of the Godhead, but rather something that we are already a part of (regardless of Jesus Christ): ‘we never “create” or earn the Spirit; we discover this inner abiding as we learn to draw upon our deepest inner life. This utterly unified field is always *given*’¹²³ Rohr’s conception of the Holy Spirit is thus linked to the idea of a ‘unified field’ – that everything is connected and we are all a part of the one source. This is a form of monism and it helps shed light on Rohr’s antipathy to what he terms ‘dualism’.

Rohr tells us that he agrees with Jung who says ‘the One Great Mystery is revealed at the beginning and forever beckons us forward toward its full realization’ Rohr adds that whilst some call this ‘homing device’ their ‘soul’, others call it ‘the indwelling Holy Spirit’ and others call it ‘nostalgia or dreamtime’¹²⁴. The implication of this is that the Holy Spirit is indwelling. Although Rohr also speaks of the Holy Spirit as ‘a guide, a kind of medical advocate, an inner compass’¹²⁵ it seems that he views this as something that is already there in us and is a part of us: ‘Home is another word for the Spirit that we are, Our True Self in God....The common word for this inner abiding place of the Spirit, which is also a place of longing, has usually been soul. We have our soul already – we do not “get” it by any

¹²⁰ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 7 – page 93

¹²¹ *Falling upwards* – preface – the invitation to the further journey page xi

¹²² *Falling Upwards* – chapter 7 – page 90 – this theme is further developed in Rohr’s book *The Divine Dance* – see beginning of this essay.

¹²³ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 7 – page 90 – here Rohr references the author Annie Dillard – full quote from *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* ‘In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world’s rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned.’

¹²⁴ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 7 – page 88

¹²⁵ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 7 – page 91

purification process or by joining any group or from the hands of a bishop. The end is already planted in us at the beginning, and it gnaws away at us until we get there freely and consciously'¹²⁶.

Building onto this, Rohr slightly misquoting John 14:18, tells us that 'we are promised, "You will not be left orphaned" (John 14:18) without a mother or a home.' This is a subtle but important change of emphasis by Rohr; John 14:18 is Jesus' promise to us that he will not leave us as orphans, but that he (Jesus) will come to us in the person of the Holy Spirit.¹²⁷ With his slight misquote, Rohr is effectively disconnecting the Holy Spirit from Jesus. He then uses the biblical quote to back up his notion that the Spirit already is in us, and goes on to inform us that this verse was 'probably one of the many reasons the Holy Spirit was usually considered feminine', thus further distancing the Holy Spirit from Jesus.¹²⁸ He then reiterates his belief that Holy Spirit is female, by stating: 'the Holy Spirit is always entirely *for us*, more than we are for ourselves, it seems. She speaks in our favour against the negative voices that judge and condemn us.'¹²⁹

In some of his later meditations Rohr speaks of the Holy Spirit as a 'force field'.¹³⁰

Rohr calls us to follow his teachings

Another thing which troubles me is that having relegated Jesus, Rohr has a tendency to push himself forwards. In *Falling Upwards*, he seems to appropriate biblical terminology associated with Jesus, for himself. At the end of chapter 10, he expresses the hope that we are becoming a 'shining person' too and 'that this book is helping you to see it, allow it, and trust it. Otherwise, this book too will be just some more words – instead of words becoming flesh. Until it becomes flesh, it cannot shine and shine brightly.'¹³¹ In John 1:1-14; it is Jesus who is the Word made flesh, Jesus who is light of men, who shines in the darkness; any attempt by Rohr, to appropriate this role for himself, is blasphemous. Furthermore, in chapter 6, when discussing the church he writes 'the formal church has always been a halfhearted bride for me, while the Franciscans considerably better. The Gospel itself is my full wedding partner.'¹³² Whilst this may be reflective of the meaning of his celibate calling, the language he uses has partial echoes of Ephesians 5:25-27; where the church is the bride, and Jesus Christ, not Rohr is the bridegroom¹³³. It is worth considering here, the words of old hymn:

¹²⁶ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 7 – page 91. Rohr adds that the most that a bishop or sacrament can do is fan the awareness of this into flame, but great love and great suffering are sometimes bigger fans for this 'much-needed flame'.

¹²⁷ John 14:18 "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."

¹²⁸ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 7 – page 91. No justification or evidence is given for his assertion that 'the Holy Spirit was usually considered feminine'.

¹²⁹ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 7 - page 92

¹³⁰ Richard Rohr – *Scripture – The Spirit Still Speaks* – Sunday, January 8, 2017. Available at <https://cac.org/spirit-still-speaks-2017-01-08/>

¹³¹ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 10 – page 125

¹³² *Falling Upwards* – chapter 6 – page 81. If we consider Rohr's approach to scripture ('scripture as validated by experience and experience as by tradition'), this statement becomes even more puzzling.

¹³³ Ephesians 5:25-27 "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."

“The Churches One Foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. She is new creation by water and the word. From heaven He came and sought her to be His Holy bride. With His own blood He bought her and for her life He died.”¹³⁴

Rohr pre-empts criticisms of his teachings by saying that those who do not embrace and follow them are ‘not true leaders or elders’ and are ‘immature’¹³⁵. He tells us that we need to change and move beyond the boundaries of our own tradition or ‘starter group’, becoming ‘both-and’ rather than ‘either-or thinkers’; and that it is because we are only able to ‘comprehend’ people a ‘bit beyond’ ourselves; ‘one step above’ our own ‘level of consciousness’, that we invariably consider ‘those at deeper (or “higher”) levels beyond’ us, ‘wrong, sinful, heretical, dangerous, or even worthy of killing’.¹³⁶

Rohr then tells us that when Jesus began his public ministry with the word “repent”, what he really meant was ‘change your mind’; Rohr takes this to mean that ‘change and growth’ must be ‘programmed into your spirituality’, and he gives us the biblical references, Mark 1:15 and Matthew 4:17, in support of this.¹³⁷ But he misses the point; the word for ‘repent’, *metanoia*, carries the meaning, not only to ‘change your mind’, but also to turn away from sin, turn away from evil and turn to God. In Mark 1:15 Jesus says “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news”. This is a turning away from sin and a turning to God in Jesus. Rohr (who is both pluralist and universalist) ignores this aspect of meaning and context, concluding somewhat bizarrely that this, (ie Jesus’ call to repent), ‘did not strongly influence Christian history’.¹³⁸ He also adds that it was because ‘this pattern of resistance is so clear and so defeating for Jesus’ that he said “Do not give dogs what is holy, or throw your pearls before swine. They will trample them, and then turn on you and tear you to pieces” (Matt 7:6).¹³⁹ It seems that from this that Rohr is trying to tell us that those who embrace and try to pass on Rohr’s message of ‘religious evolution’¹⁴⁰ can expect some resistance too.

In chapter 6, Rohr quotes Jesus’ words in Luke 14:26 ‘If anyone comes after me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple’. He then tells us that ‘to be honest and consistent, one must ask if “church family” is not also a family that one has to eventually “hate” in this very same way, and with the same scandal involved as hating natural family.’¹⁴¹ Rohr writes that he will address this in a later chapter under the rubric of ‘emerging Christianity’. He does not develop the theme further in his book – but there is a

¹³⁴ Written in 1866 by Revd. Samuel John Stone as part of a series of 12 hymns explaining the various sections of the Apostles Creed and defend the fact of the inspiration of Scripture. ‘The Church’s One Foundation’ explains the 9th article. See <http://songsandhymns.org/hymns/detail/the-churchs-one-foundation>

¹³⁵ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 1 – page 9

¹³⁶ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 1 – page 10 – in other words if we can’t embrace his philosophy, it is not because what he is teaching is inherently wrong, but because we ourselves are deficient!

¹³⁷ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 1 – page 11

¹³⁸ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 1 – page 11

¹³⁹ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 1 – page 11

¹⁴⁰ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 1 – page 10

¹⁴¹ *Falling Upwards* – chapter 6 – page 73 & 85

disturbing tendency for those who become more fully immersed in his teachings, to eventually leave the church¹⁴²; separating of followers from their churches and families is alarmingly resonant of the pattern adopted by leaders of cults.

Brief Comments on some other works by Rohr

The Gospel Coalition recently published a review, by theologian Fred Sanders, of Rohr's most recent book, *The Divine Dance*.¹⁴³ Any Christian who is attracted by Rohr's writings should read this review, which points out that rather than being about the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, *The Divine Dance* is "a book about an alternative spirituality of Flow, committed to a metaphysic that refuses to recognize a distinction between God and the world. It's one long looting of the language of Trinitarian theology, with the avowed goal of using that language to teach an entirely novel doctrine....For this doctrine to be marketed as the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is insupportable. This sustained misrepresentation is what makes this book a piece of false teaching in the church". Please read the full review - it can be accessed at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/book-review-the-divine-dance>

In 1997, writing *The Wanderer*, Stephanie Block wrote of concerns about the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC)¹⁴⁴, concluding that it had 'become a magnet for the dissenting elements of the Catholic Church' and that its journal *Radical Grace*¹⁴⁵ had alarmed local Catholic Christians by what they perceived as 'a distortion of Scripture, an affront to doctrine and a perversion of their Catholic call to holiness'.

Conclusions

Rohr is extremely prolific writer, and because of the different belief system and worldview behind his thinking, almost every sentence requires thorough unpacking. Thus, by necessity, in this paper I have only been able to review a relatively small sample of his output. Further work should be done, but for now I will draw this to a close and summarise my thoughts.

My conclusion is that although currently very popular, Richard Rohr is really very worrying, and all the more so because of the manner in which he disseminates, and the degree to which he persuades others to embrace, his own unorthodox ideas. Rohr's philosophy may seem loving, non-condemnatory and inclusive but it is actually heretical. What is particularly disturbing is how many bible-believing Christians are being taken in by him and subsequently, over time, abandoning their faith. To understand how this happens, we probably need to consider the adage about how to boil a

¹⁴² If you look at the descriptions of the course units for Rohr's two year Living School for Action and Contemplation, you will understand why this can happen. (see <https://cac.org/living-school/program-details/course-units/>)

¹⁴³ Rohr – *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (Whitaker House, 2016)

¹⁴⁴ See <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=655>

¹⁴⁵ Discontinued but superseded by the CAC's current journal *Oneing*

frog: if you want to boil a frog, you do not put it into a pan of boiling for it will jump straight out. Rather, you put it into a pan of cold water and heat it up slowly – the frog will not notice and will die.

If Rohr were to confront a bible believing Christian with a clear and direct statement of his beliefs, most would be likely to walk away; but this is not what he does. He makes much of his Franciscan roots, thus we feel that we can trust him, and he uses language and terminology in such a way that it sounds very attractive. Rohr frequently gives short (sometimes inaccurate and frequently out of context) bible quotes to back up his points; but unless one reads his work with an open bible and a critically and prayerfully engaged and watchful mind, any misinformation won't be spotted. His more unorthodox ideas are presented dogmatically and repetitively, but having found his other teachings helpful, his followers are less likely to question them. Those who allow themselves to be disciplined by his daily readings and meditations are likely to be absorbing small (and sometimes large) doses of error which systematically build up to move them away from a biblically based Christian belief that upholds Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.