

# Reflections

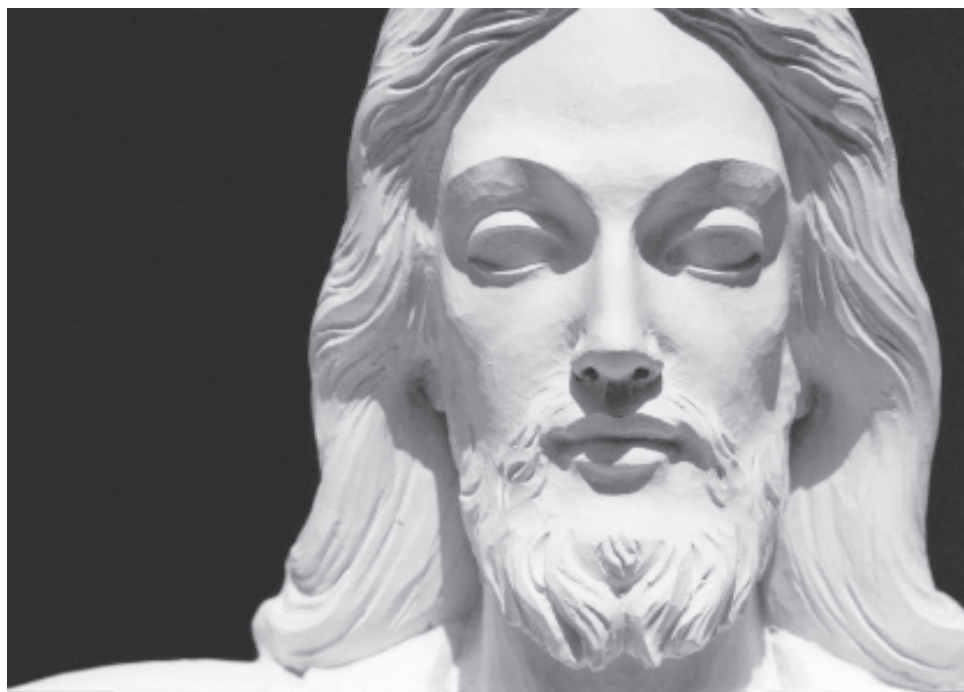
## Reclaiming Jesus

an ecumenical Jewish perspective

CHARLES BURACK

*“Reflections” is an occasional section in Interreligious Insight. Pieces draw on various traditions to unfold an important theme in spirituality, philosophy, or interreligious work. We hope that readers will make their own fruitful connections for dialogue and engagement. This issue offers Reflections on ....*

Jesus: photo or original art, courtesy of Kashi Ashram, Sebastian, Florida



When I was a young boy, the name “Jesus Christ” stirred fear and anger in me. I knew the name was invoked to slander and slay my people, my ancestors, near and distant. Our Hebrew school teachers taught us about the Romans, the Crusades, the ghettos, the pogroms, the death camps. We read history books and

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saw documentary films. We saw the tattooed numbers on the arms of some of the old people in our congregation and heard their frightening firsthand stories. I associated the very word “Christian” with centuries of prejudice, intolerance, persecution, power, and violence. For nearly two millennia, massive lies and violence had been perpetrated against my people “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Millions of my ancestors were slaughtered as subhuman “vermin” and “devils”.

I had never read a Christian Bible, but I knew it blamed the Jews for killing Jesus. One day, when I was no more than seven or eight, I was playing with several neighborhood kids in the backyard of one boy’s house. Two of my playmates were Catholic sisters who lived down the street. Suddenly, one of the girls, upset by something I had said or done, stopped our game, and called me a vile name – either a kike or dirty Jew. The accusation seemed to come out of nowhere and to punch me in the gut. When I challenged her, she said that the Jews were evil because they killed Jesus Christ, the son of God. I remember fighting back, insisting that the Jews didn’t kill Jesus, and that he wasn’t the messiah or the son of God. The argument escalated but went nowhere. I went home incensed and humiliated.

I was born in Chicago, and shortly after my second birthday, my family moved to a northern suburb that was more than half Jewish. Most of the Jews were Conservative and Reform; a minority were Reconstructionist and unaffiliated. My immediate neighborhood was

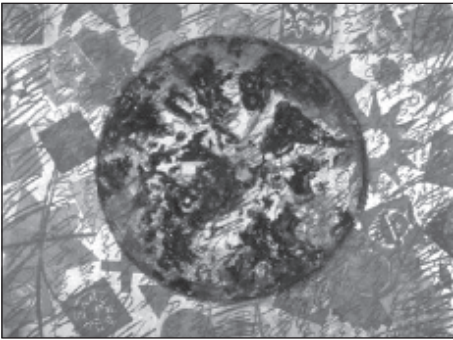
probably three fourths Jewish, and most of my grade school friends were Jews. In junior high school, my social horizon expanded a little. Some kids came from a nearby town that was largely Italian Catholic, and others lived at the local army base. I became good friends with several Italian boys. Though we would sometimes tease each other about our religious and cultural differences, there was a lot of warmth between us, and we had fun talking and playing the usual boys’ games.

In high school, the various ethnic and religious groups balkanized, and tensions increased. Jews hung out mainly with Jews, and Italians with Italians. There were also small factions of other groups, like Protestants and African Americans. The groups weren’t completely segregated, but there was a clear sense of boundaries. For me, high school was a chaotic, tense and alienating place dominated by in-groups and out-groups. During my sophomore year, I got more involved in our synagogue youth group. At youth group events I felt I really belonged. In a way, I coped with Jewish-Christian tensions by avoiding them.

Because of my liberal leanings, I chose to attend the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. In 1977 I found myself in a truly multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-national, multi-gender and multi-class environment. During my college years, I developed a modest appreciation of Christianity that I would sustain for the next decade. I did not become well-informed about Christianity, but I did

develop many close friendships with Christians of various denominations. Most of them were quite liberal and had rejected the claim that only Christians can be saved.

Throughout my early 20s, I felt I could trust and befriend liberal Christians but was somewhat wary around more traditional and conservative Christians. When in a group of strangers, I tended to not disclose my Jewishness unless I sensed that the individuals were sufficiently open-minded. I felt fortunate that neither my name nor my appearance “gave me away”. I didn’t want to stand out or be stereotyped as a Jew. I wanted to pass, to fit in, and usually did.



*World Citizenship; original art, Lonnie Hanzon*

The desire to befriend non-Jews intensified after I became disillusioned with traditional Judaism. Throughout college I seesawed between intensifying my commitment to Judaism and letting it go. During my junior year, I studied at a yeshiva in Jerusalem and became neo-orthodox. When I completed college, I entered an orthodox rabbinical school, but within the first year became utterly

disillusioned with the ethnocentrism and sexism I found there. I lost my faith in God, in the Jewish tradition, and in my own spiritual nature.

As soon as I rejected traditional Judaism, I felt a strong urge to get to know the different peoples and cultures of the world. I wanted to become a citizen of the human community, not remain “a member of the tribe”. I actively sought out friendships and romances with non-Jews and began studying different cultures, ancient and modern. Drawn to a career in psychology, I studied cross-cultural perspectives on human development at the University of Chicago and also worked as a research assistant. I was especially interested in the psychology and anthropology of religion and was eager to understand in a larger context my own early attraction to religion and subsequent loss of faith.

When I completed my graduate studies, I took a job in the human resources department of a governmental agency. At the agency, for the first time in my life, almost all of my co-workers were Christian. I discovered I could work harmoniously and happily in an environment where I was definitely a minority person. I didn’t hide my Jewishness, nor did I advertise it. At the time, it wasn’t an important part of my identity: I was still an atheist, or at best, an agnostic. I focused on seeing and treating people as individual human beings and, for the most part, felt that people were treating me that way. It certainly wasn’t a perfect situation, but I felt there was a better blending of religion, race and class than I had seen in other settings.

But the longer I stayed at the agency, the more I saw subtle signs of racism, sexism, classism and anti-Semitism. Several female and African American middle managers, including two of my own managers, told me they experienced a glass ceiling. I also heard a rumor that no Jew would rise to the level of senior management. This news disturbed me but did not affect me personally because I had no plans to rise in the agency, seeing it as a way station until I figured out my true career path. Though I was not focused on my own Jewishness at this time, I was always aware I wasn't a Christian.

During the Christmas season, that sense of separation was accentuated. Throughout the month of December, Christmas decorations, celebrations and songs seemed to be everywhere, and even strangers would wish each other "Merry Christmas". There seemed to be the assumption that everyone celebrated Christmas. To be polite, I would generally respond "Merry Christmas", but I felt like an outsider trying to not to stand out. Part of me wanted to fit in, to be a mainstream member of the larger American society, while another part chafed at the mainstream for assuming everyone celebrates Christmas.

The situation was a little different on some university campuses. Indeed, most of the Christians I befriended at the University of Chicago did not make this assumption. They were conscious and respectful of religious differences. At UC, I dated a Presbyterian woman who came from an academic family with broad cultural interests and a wide range

of friendships and associations. She greatly respected my Jewish heritage, and I enjoyed her liberal Protestant perspective on life. I asked her many questions about her Presbyterian heritage and other Protestant denominations.

It wasn't until my thirties, when I began graduate studies in English literature at Northwestern University, that I gained a deeper understanding and appreciation of Christianity. Of course, nearly all of the well-known British and American writers who lived before World War II were Christians, at least by birth. And yet most of the writers I was drawn to – Wordsworth, Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Hardy, Conrad, Yeats, Lawrence, Woolf – were deeply critical of their Christian heritage, and many even rejected it. They were particularly critical of institutional Christianity in its many forms. And yet all had strong spiritual needs and sensibilities and felt impelled to honor them. I strongly identified with these writers because my own mystical nature was starting to revive after almost a decade in exile. Once again I was beginning to have spiritual encounters with people and in nature. Once again I was beginning to experience the mysterious invisible presence that binds all beings. So I took a passionate interest in the efforts of these writers to discover and create a new spiritual approach to life unfettered by narrow, rigid dogmas. Many were striving to develop a holistic approach that revered the wholeness of life, of creation, and of every creature. I was thrilled by their heroic efforts to honor and experience the unity of being.

From these writers I realized that it was possible to separate Jesus the man from Christ the creation of the Church. It became clear that Jesus had been a man of great faith, compassion, courage, patience and creative intelligence. And he demonstrated the revolutionary willingness, like other prophets, to stand for justice, mercy and equality. Many of the writers, such as Blake, Emerson, Yeats and Lawrence, understood Jesus's claim to divinity as exemplary, not exclusive: he was announcing that all of us are sons and daughters of God; that all of us are imbued with divine energy; and that it is our task to realize and act on our inner divinity. This seemed possible, plausible and even persuasive to me. Indeed, I was thrilled by the idea that the divine life flowed in every being – and was the source and substance of all living creatures. At the same time, I was aware that this view of Jesus was very much a minority view – and a dangerous heresy. Most of the Western world saw him as the only Son of God, the second member of the divine Trinity. I decided I needed to learn more about traditional – “official” – Christianity.

Having realized my error of taking either a traditional-religious or a modern-secular approach to the study of Judaism, I decided to take a both-and approach to Christianity. This meant taking secular university courses on the New Testament as well as studying with two friends, a married couple, who were learned and devout Pentecostal Christians. By this time, I had moved to California to do a doctorate in English at UC Berkeley, where I specialized in reli-

gious and psychological themes in modern literature. From my university studies, I could see that some of the Gospels were unequivocally asserting that Jesus's divinity was exclusive and that the Jews were fundamentally responsible for his conviction and death.

My relationship with my two Pentecostal friends, whom I had met in graduate school, proved to be as significant as the Gospel of Matthew we studied together. In 1993 I approached them with an interest in learning more about the New Testament from religious Christians. They graciously offered to meet once a week to study together. They would teach me the Gospel, and I would share my knowledge of Torah and Jewish practice.

For almost two years, we had a lovely time sharing meals, studying Matthew line by line, and comparing Christian and Jewish perspectives and practices. To my surprise, as we approached the end of the text, my friends began pressuring me to convert. They said they worried about my soul and wanted to save it from damnation. When I complained that they were scaring me with their rhetoric, they said it was better to convert out of fear than not at all, and better to hedge my bets and ensure the salvation of my soul. I felt no real inclination toward conversion and began to resent their anxious insistence. In our last session together, they said they felt like failures for being unable to convert their good friend. When the class ended, they cut me out of their life. I felt hurt, angry, and deeply disillusioned.

The experience played into my latent



*St. Matthew, Kappadokia, Turkey; photo, Cetta Kenney*

childhood fear that “all true Christians want to convert non-Christians.” My friends were genuinely kind, loving, intelligent and well-educated people – they had even inspired me to begin praying again after the long lapse following rabbinical school – yet their love was distorted by a dogmatic attachment to doctrinal Christianity.

Over the next few years, my understanding of Christianity was shaped by my dissertation research. I was writing about sacred experiences in D. H. Lawrence’s novels. Lawrence was particularly interested in understanding Christianity in the context of other world religions, and so I had the pleasure of reading many of the turn-of-the-century texts he had read. Theosophical texts by Helen Blavatsky and Annie Besant portrayed Jesus as a man who had realized his inner divinity and whose life journey served as a model of divinization for humanity. The Theosophists found this mystical vision of the divinized man in many other mystical traditions, including Kabbalah. Though I was aware that Theosophy was sometimes dismissed as a crackpot, syncretistic movement, I was excited to discover that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, a variety of artists, intellectuals and other seekers were beginning to see Jesus as an exemplary divinized man rather than as the sole Son of God. I was also thrilled to see the core insights of Jewish mysticism compared to those of other traditions. I began to see a mystical common ground among all peoples.

Though I admired Jesus as a spiritual revolutionary, I still did not feel

drawn at a gut level to follow his spiritual path. Why? Perhaps because the Gospels revealed so little about his inner life and also because he had not lived a full life, never having married or raised a family. I was more drawn to the Jewish and Buddhist paths. Indeed, I had become involved in the Jewish Renewal movement and in Kabbalah in the early 1990s. I had also begun practicing vipassana meditation in 1994. With Buddhism, I had no personal or collective memory of anti-Semitism.

In 1997, I got a job teaching English at a Catholic liberal arts college. Two years later, I enrolled part-time at an ecumenical Catholic institute that trains individuals who feel called to be spiritual directors. Though I no longer wanted to be a rabbi, I still had a deep desire to support others in exploring, clarifying and deepening their spiritual lives. Traditionally, spiritual directors were Catholic priests, but in recent decades, lay Catholics, and even non-Catholics, have been trained in this art of spiritual companionship. Indeed, I had been encouraged to enroll in the program by two rabbis who had recently completed it.

My own spiritual director was a former Catholic monk. I chose to work with him not only because he was recommended by a friend but also because I wanted to explore and deepen my spiritual life with an open-minded and kind-hearted Christian. I sensed I would grow spiritually by directly facing my concerns about Christianity and by seeking to learn from its rich heritage. I worked with Patrick for several years,

and our relationship proved to be profoundly transforming. He encouraged me to bring all of my life's questions and concerns to prayer. It was through his gentle support that prayer became a daily and crucial dimension of my life. He even encouraged me to explore my childhood identification with Moses.

Shortly before starting the spiritual direction program, I began teaching part-time at a truly interfaith university that would profoundly change my life. The University of Creation Spirituality (UCS) was founded in 1996 by the visionary theologian Matthew Fox and was in operation for ten years. A former Catholic priest, Fox was silenced by the Vatican for his radically progressive, ecumenical stance. He was and is convinced that the core mystical traditions of most of the world's religions share fundamental values, visions and principles. This view reminded me of what the Theosophists had been saying a century earlier. The school's faculty members were from a variety of religious traditions and shared Fox's view of the holiness and oneness of the universe and of every being in it.

Through my relationships with Fox, other faculty members, staff and students, I developed a new vision of Jesus and Christianity. Fox emphasizes the Jewish roots of Jesus and says that the "Christ consciousness" Jesus attained is equivalent to the various types of enlightened consciousness described by other traditions. Jesus's realization of his inner "cosmic Christ" is comparable to the Buddha's realization of his "Buddha nature", Moses's realization of the divine

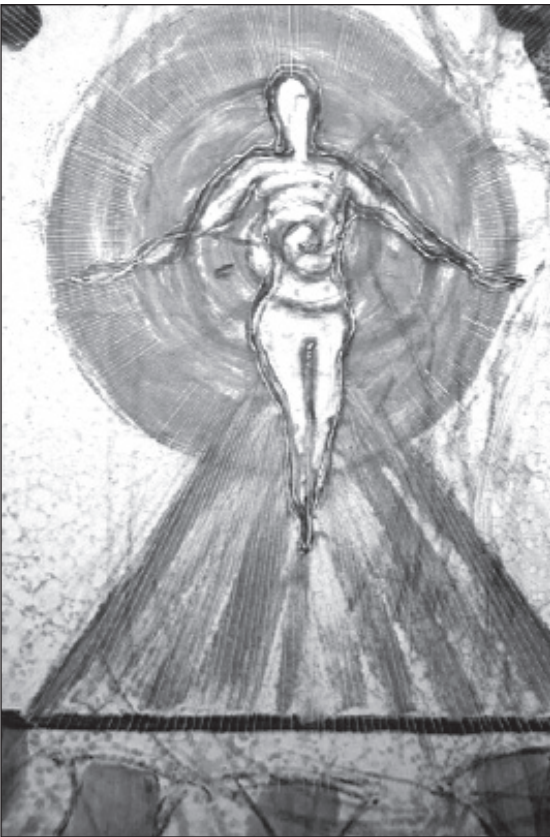
“I am”, and Lao Tsu’s realization of “the Tao”. In Fox’s view, all of these spiritual masters are encouraging us to both be and act in alignment with a deep awareness of essential unity. Other teachers at the school, like Andrew Harvey, emphasized the portrait of Jesus that emerges in the “Gnostic Gospels”, particularly in the Gospel of Thomas. This Jesus is unmistakably encouraging his followers to realize their inner divinity and become spiritual warriors for equality, justice, compassion and peace.

A completely Jewish Jesus emerges in a recent biography written by scholar

and minister Bruce Chilton, whom I first met at UCS. In Chilton’s account, enthusiastically endorsed by the well-known scholar and rabbi Jacob Neusner, Jesus was a rabbi steeped in the merkahah (chariot) mysticism practiced by the sages of his day. That meditative practice as well as the practice of ritual purification (mikvah), both learned in all likelihood from Rabbi John the Baptist, enabled Jesus to experience the Ruach Ha-Kodesh (Holy Spirit) and to have prophetic visions of God’s Kingdom. Jesus was a Torah Jew, who like other prophets, castigated those who followed the letter but abrogated the spirit of the Law. I once heard a Jesus scholar refer to Jesus as “a Jewish Renewal rabbi”.

Through UCS, I had the opportunity to offer spiritual direction to the Master’s and doctoral students. Though most of the students came from Christian backgrounds, I found that their spiritual lives were very similar to mine. They experienced spirit in nature, in meditation, in prayer, in creative expression, in dreams, and in their relationships with people. The main difference was that some had a profound and ongoing relationship with Jesus.

I myself have had two encounters with the spirit of Jesus, one of which changed my life. In 1999 I contracted a terrible case of pneumonia and almost died of dehydration. In addition to receiving medical care, I sought out a spiritual healing from a renowned Sufi healer. I had never had a spiritual healing before but was desperate to regain my health and vitality. The healer was a Jewish doctor who had converted to



*Inner Divinity; original art, Lonnie Hanzon*



Islam. One of the things he told me was that pneumonia was often caused by grief. He was right: I was grieving the loss of a recent relationship and the fact that I still wasn't married at age 44. So in addition to performing a healing on my lungs, he conducted a healing of my heart. The latter involved praying to Allah to send the divine love into me while I stood before him. After he said, "Let the love of Allah enter him and cleanse and fill his heart," I felt a huge bolt of energy rip into the front of my body and send me into convulsions and paroxysms. It was as if a terrible-wonderful fire was consuming my chest and pelvis. At the same time, I could feel a powerful waterfall of energy being poured into the opening. The force of the incoming energy was so great that I was literally bent backward. Several people came up behind me to prevent me from falling on my head. Suddenly, it felt as if my entire body was undergoing an orgasmic convulsion. I could feel my spirit being catapulted upward into an utterly new realm. It looked like the dome of heaven was opening, and I felt my spirit rushing up into a space of gorgeous purple light fringed with rose light – like a purple heaven ringed by a vaporous rose crown. Suddenly, I had no strength to stand and allowed myself to collapse into the arms of the people behind me. Then the vision began to shift to one of bright sparkling light, like a shower, a curtain, a milky way, of twinkling white light. As the light faded, I was able to stand on my own power and suddenly had a vision of Jesus after the crucifixion being held up by

those who loved him. I was surprised, confused and a little embarrassed by the vision, but I accepted it as part of the total experience.

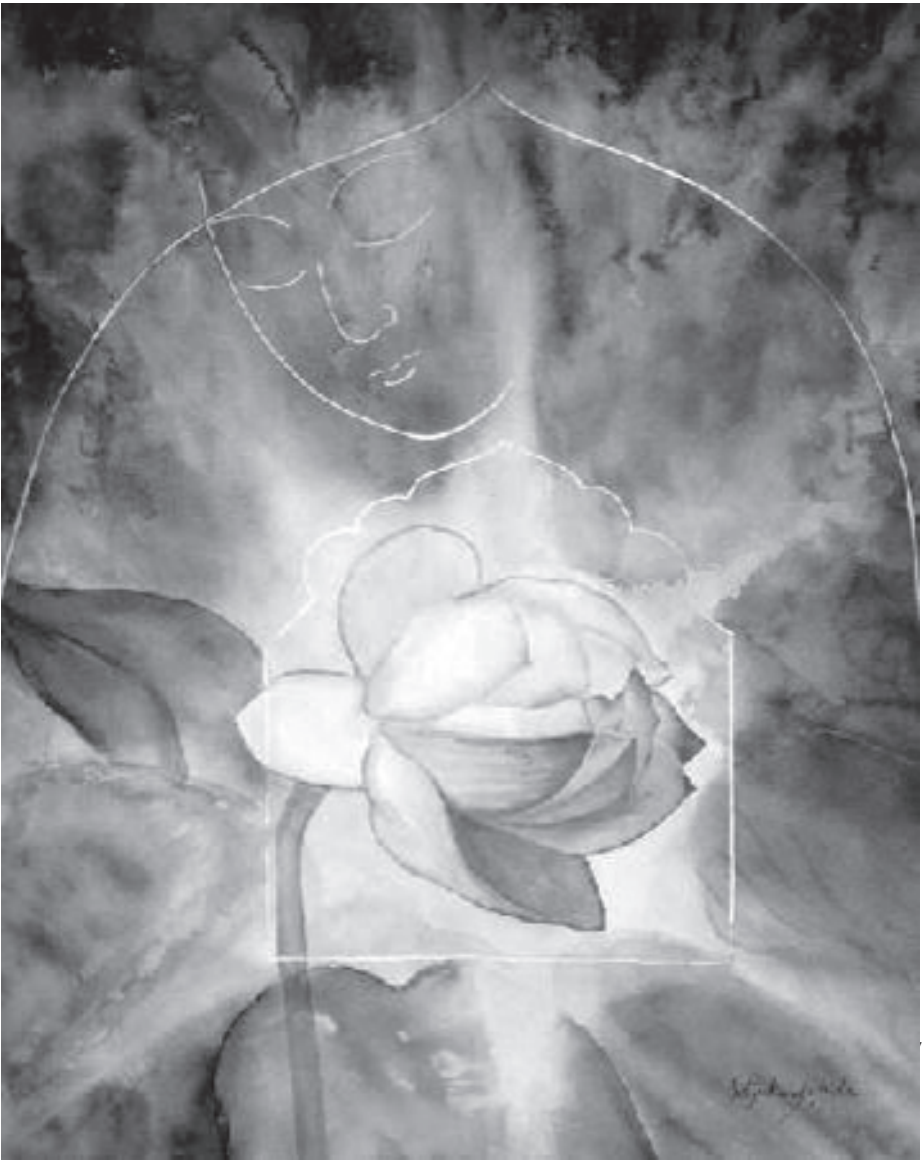
For the next few weeks, I was filled with a boundless sense of love and generosity that overflowed into my life and that still continues to influence me. When several months later I expressed my surprise to Andrew Harvey that I had had a vision of Jesus during a Sufi healing, he said he wasn't surprised because the Sufis consider Jesus (Issa) to be the prophet of love. In January 2003, I connected with the woman who would become my beloved wife. She was raised Catholic, but has been deeply influenced by Buddhism, Sufism, and Judaism.

I now see Jesus as a great prophet, guide, mystic, healer, and teacher – as well as a fellow Jew. His original followers were mostly Jews. Whether he saw himself as the messiah or merely as someone taking messianic action, it is clear that he was trying to bring about a spiritual renewal of the People of Israel and to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth. As he himself says, he was not coming to abrogate the Torah but to fulfill it. While critical of hypocrites and opponents, he encouraged every person to do teshuvah – to return to the Source and live a life rooted in Eternity. Jesus was not calling for an exclusive congregation of Messianic Jews to worship him as "the Son of God"; rather, he was calling for an inclusive community of human beings – initially composed largely of Jews – who would, like himself, recognize and express their inner divinity and thereby transform themselves and

the world. He was saying that we are all “Sons and Daughters of God”.

A similar transformational vision can be found in Kabbalah and in other mystical traditions. Indeed, most Jewish mystics affirm that we have within us divine, or at least spiritual, energies. These creative energies are known as the sephirot, the ten divine qualities or powers. Most Jewish mystics believe that our inner sephirotic powers are agents

of human and cosmic transformation. In their view, each person possesses creative energies that can be called forth to mend, uplift and transform the world. Our acts of tikkun olam – repairing the world – are themselves quasi-messianic acts that help restore the primordial harmony of cosmos, humanity and divinity. Through activating our own deepest soul energies we create or bring the Messiah.



*Look for the Moment; original art, Setsuko Yoshida*