

Richard Rohr Reorders the Universe



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Not long ago, on his way to the post office in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Richard Rohr, a seventy-six-year-old Franciscan friar, had a spiritual experience. "This light is interminably long," he told me one morning, in late August, as we stopped at a red light while retracing his route. Rohr hates wasting time, and he had been sitting at the light fuming when a divine message arrived. "I heard as close as I know to the voice of God," he said. The voice suggested that he find happiness where he was, rather than searching for it elsewhere.

"For two and a half minutes, I'm not in control at this stoplight," he said. Being made to sit still required a surrender to a force greater than his ego; it was an opportunity to practice contemplation, a form of meditative prayer that has equivalents in almost every religion. In Christianity, the practice dates back to the first several centuries after Christ, though it was revitalized in the twentieth century by the Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Rohr told me, "Merton pulled back the veil."

Rohr is slight, with a white beard and the starry eyes of a person who spends long periods in silence. Over the past four decades, he has gained a devoted following for his provocative vision of Christianity. He runs the Center for Action and Contemplation, a meditation hub and religious school that its residents refer to as Little Vatican City.

The campus is made up of a cluster of adobe casitas strung out on a dusty road outside Albuquerque; small shrines to St. Francis and St. Clare dot the land between the runnels of an ancient aquifer, which still courses with water from a nearby river, feeding the garden.

Rohr wakes around 5:45 a.m. each day and spends an hour praying wordlessly. "I'm trying to find my way to yes," he told me, adding that he often wakes up in a state of no. "As in, 'No, I do not want to be followed around by Eliza today,' " he said, smiling impishly. After that, he heads to the center and leads a morning session that includes a twenty-minute contemplation, a daily gospel reading, and the ringing of a Buddhist singing bowl. The center's classes also include Hindu and yogic methods of integrating the body into prayer, along with teachings drawn from indigenous spiritual traditions that focus on the sacredness of the earth.

More conservative Christians tend to orient their theology around Jesus—his death and resurrection, which made salvation possible for those who believe. Rohr thinks that this focus is misplaced. The universe has existed for thirteen billion years; it couldn't be, he argues, that God's loving, salvific relationship with creation began only two thousand years ago, when the historical baby Jesus was placed in the musty hay of a manger, and that it only became widely knowable to humanity around six hundred years ago, when the printing press was invented and Bibles began being mass-produced. Instead, in his most recent book, *The Universal*

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Christ, which came out last year, Rohr argues that the spirit of Christ is not the same as the person of Jesus. Christ—essentially, God’s love for the world—has existed since the beginning of time, suffuses everything in creation, and has been present in all cultures and civilizations. Jesus is an incarnation of that spirit, and following him is our “best shortcut” to accessing it. But this spirit can also be found through the practices of other religions, like Buddhist meditation, or through communing with nature.

Rohr has arrived at this conclusion through what he sees as an orthodox Franciscan reading of scripture. “This is not heresy, universalism, or a cheap version of Unitarianism,” he writes. “This is the Cosmic Christ, who always was, who became incarnate in time, and who is still being revealed.”

“All my big thoughts have coalesced into this,” he told me. “It’s my end-of-life book.” His message has been overwhelmingly well-received. A podcast version of Rohr’s book has been downloaded more than a million times. He has also attracted some high-profile followers. Rohr named his Jack

Russell terrier Opie, as a nod to Oprah Winfrey, whom he considers a personal friend; he has appeared twice on her “SuperSoul Sunday” program and has been to dinner at her home in Montecito. “We really connect,” he told me. “She knows I’m not seeking fame or money.” He is also revered by Melinda Gates and is close to Bono. “He’ll just drop me a little love note,” Rohr said. “He’s a very loving person.” Both Gates and Bono have attended private retreats with Rohr. The friar, who has taken a vow of poverty and lives as a modern-day hermit, seems tickled by his occasional brushes with fame.



Many of Rohr’s followers are millennials, and he believes that his popularity signifies a deep spiritual hunger on the part of young people who no longer claim affiliation with traditional religion. These people, whom sociologists call the “nones,” have grown in number, from sixteen per cent to twenty-three per cent of American adults, between 2007 and 2014. “People aren’t simply skeptical anymore, or even openly hostile to the church,” he told me. “They just don’t see a relevance.” Rohr doesn’t

believe that most nones are secular, as many assume; he thinks that they are questioning traditional labels but hoping to find a spiritual message that speaks to them. His reach is based, in part, on his willingness to be fearless in his critique of conservative Christianity, which he often talks about as a “toxic religion.” He attempts to strike a difficult balance: calling out the flaws in contemporary Christianity while affirming its core tenets. “People confuse Richard as a deconstructionist when

they hear him talk about toxic religion,” Michael Poffenberger, the executive director of the Center for Action and Contemplation, told me, “It’s not an attack on religion; it’s an introduction to the sacredness of everything.”

Rohr lives in Little Vatican City, in a one-room cottage behind a garden of succulents. He asked me not to disclose the exact location. “You’d be amazed at the amount of people who just want to say they met with you,” he told me one afternoon, while sitting in the large, open space that serves as his living room, kitchen, and study.

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(During my time in New Mexico, one such devotee returned several times, having driven nearly a thousand miles to seek Rohr's blessing, which the friar gave each time). Rohr spends most of his day in the hermitage, perched on a ladder-back barstool, where he does his writing. "It's going to sound so woo-woo, but I just sit down and it comes," he told me.

His computer sits atop a bookshelf crammed with biographies of contemporary mystics, including Merton and Thomas Keating. On a shelf by the fireplace, he keeps a fragment of bone belonging to Thérèse of Lisieux, a nineteenth-century saint. He told me that, on a recent trip to France, while standing in the infirmary room where Thérèse died, he saw a butterfly and knew, by divine inspiration, that it was a gift from her. "I felt like I was levitating," he said, adding, with a smile, "I was not." The butterfly was trying to escape the room, and he managed to pry open the old window and free it.

Rohr grew up amid a more conventional Catholicism. He was born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1943. He comes from a long line of wheat farmers who were hit first by the Dust Bowl and then by the Great Depression. "Daddy had to leave the farm and work on the railroad, painting cars," Rohr told me. The Rohrs were devout, and Richard attended Catholic school for a dollar a month. "I don't have any nun horror stories," he told me. "My experience of the nuns was of happy people. I think that's one reason I became religious." He didn't witness any instances of sexual abuse in his church community. "We didn't know the word 'pedophilia,'" he said. "But I guess it must have been happening." The only teaching he remembers receiving about sex was "don't do it." "That wasn't helpful at all," he said.

At fourteen, Rohr read *The Perfect Joy of St. Francis*, a novel about the life of the saint, and decided to become a friar. He came of age during the progressive era of the Second Vatican Council, when Catholics were challenging the narrow conceptions of church doctrine and calling for a greater engagement with the world.

As a novice, he worked in an Acoma Pueblo community, in New Mexico, conducting surveys for the Church on religious belief in the area. Though the community was largely Christian, people also followed traditional religious practices: mothers walked outside with their children just before dawn to greet the sun, a meditation ritual that dates back at least eight hundred years. "We thought we knew something about contemplation," he told me. "But we were not the only ones."

Rohr was ordained in 1970, clad in hippie vestments. "In the seventies, Jesus was in," he said. As a young priest, he led retreats for teen-agers; at one, a group of high-school jocks began speaking in tongues. People flocked to hear Rohr speak, and audio cassettes of his sermons travelled all over the country. His taped retreats were adapted into his first books, which made him a kind of Catholic celebrity. "I became a little demigod," he told me, ruefully.

He started a radical Christian community in Cincinnati, called *New Jerusalem*, but, by the mid-eighties, he began to feel that it wasn't sufficiently focussed on global social action. He returned to New Mexico, where he started the Center for Action and Contemplation, in 1987, and the Living School, a two-year, low-residency religious-studies program, in 2014. In the center's early days, the staff held weekly protests at a nuclear-weapons research facility and worked with a women's cooperative in Mexico.

Rohr came to his thinking about the Universal Christ through early Franciscan teachings. In the thirteenth century, Francis rebelled against a Catholic Church that had become fixated on its own pomp and hierarchy; he renounced worldly goods, lived in a cave, and found God in nature, revealed to him in figures such as Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Fire, and Sister Water. "His was an entirely intuitive world view," Rohr said. Later, Franciscan theologians gave heft to Francis's holistic universe by tying it to scripture—for example, to a passage of Colossians that reads,

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“The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. . . . He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” This, they argued, was evidence that God is present in the natural world.

Rohr gave this presence a name. For him, the Cosmic Christ is the spirit that is embedded in—and makes up—everything in the universe, and Jesus is the embodied version of that spirit that we can fall in love with and relate to. (Their simultaneous distinctness and oneness can be difficult for an outsider to grasp; Rohr describes “The Universal Christ” as a sequel to *The Divine Dance*, his book about the mysteries of the Trinity.) He uses many of the same verses as the early Franciscans to support his claims. “Christ’s much larger, universe-spanning role was described quite clearly in—and always in the first chapters of—John’s Gospel, Colossians, Ephesians, Hebrews, and 1 John, and shortly thereafter in the writings of the early Eastern fathers,” he writes. He believes that, after the schism between the Eastern and Western Churches, in 1054 A.D., the Eastern Church held onto a more expansive vision of Christ, but the Western Church increasingly focussed on Jesus the man. “We gradually limited the Divine Presence to the single body of Jesus, when perhaps it is as ubiquitous as light itself—and uncircumscribable by human boundaries.” The notion of Jesus as a god-king—wearing a golden crown and seated on a throne—was pushed by political rulers, who used it to justify their own power, but it limited our understanding of divinity. “It was like trying to see the universe with a too-small telescope,” Rohr writes.

One of the benefits of Rohr’s work is its attempt at radical inclusivity. “Jesus without worship of Christ invariably becomes a time- and culture-bound religion, often ethnic or even implicitly racist, which excludes much of humanity from God’s embrace,” he writes. According to his teachings, you don’t have to follow Jesus or practice the tenets of any formal religion to come by salvation, you just have to “fall in love with the divine presence, under whatever name.” For young people who have become disillusioned with the conservative churches of their childhood—

which preached Christianity’s supremacy over other religions and taught that nonbelievers would go to Hell—his message is especially welcome. Many progressive schools of Christianity teach that non-Christians can go to Heaven, but the idea of the Universal Christ allows Rohr to make a robust argument based on a version of orthodoxy, rather than on a vague sense of egalitarianism. His followers appreciate his scriptural rigor. “He’s not coming in and saying, ‘I saw a daisy, now everybody love each other,’ ” Tim Shriver, a longtime student of Rohr’s and the chairman of the Special Olympics, told me. “He’s trying to create a new understanding of religion that isn’t bound by separation, superiority, and fighting.”

Rohr’s ideas have gotten him into trouble in the past. William Paul Young—a self-described fundamentalist Christian and the author of *The Shack*, a Christian novel that has sold over twenty million copies—told me that, though he is Rohr’s friend, he worries that the friar’s teachings will be misunderstood. Young people who are frustrated with their churches might misread Rohr’s work as advocating a vague spirituality that is entirely unconnected with the scriptural Christ. “The danger of universalism is that nothing matters, especially Jesus,” he said. “Some of Rohr’s followers can read it that way.”

According to Rohr, during the early seventies, a group of local Catholics secretly recorded his sermons in an effort to have him excommunicated. They delivered the tapes to the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, then the Archbishop of Cincinnati, who reviewed them and determined that they were within the bounds of the Church’s teachings. (The current office of the Archdiocese had no knowledge of the incident.) Grumblings have persisted, but Rohr continues to preach what he believes. “I’m too old for them to bother me anymore,” Rohr told me.

Three years ago, Rohr was diagnosed with an aggressive form of prostate cancer. A year and a half ago, while alone in his home, he had a severe heart attack. He rang a friend, who ordered him to call 911 for an ambulance. Rohr refused; he didn’t want to die in the presence of strangers, so his friend raced over to rush him to the hospital. As they pulled out of his drive-

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way, Rohr said goodbye to the little house where he'd lived for twenty years, the trees, the dumpster. "I was ready to go," he told me. "But, anyway, here I am." Rohr is undergoing chemotherapy, and the cancer is now in remission, though he has reconciled himself to his mortality. "What did we ever lose by dying?" he asked me. Rohr also has Grover's disease, an autoimmune condition that makes his skin itch. "And it's wrinkly," he said. He noted that the apostle Paul speaks of the tent of the body being folded up, shrivelling and declining as it prepares to depart. "My belief is that the two universal paths are great love and great suffering," he told me. For much of his life, Rohr has used suffering as a spiritual tool to help him learn to be humble. "I pray for one humiliation a day," he told me. "It doesn't have to be major."

Rohr has an easier time talking about the end of his life than his students and followers do. In Albuquerque, his colleagues are quietly thinking about how his teachings can live on after he dies. Poffenberger, the executive director of the Center for Action and Contemplation, moved to New Mexico from Washington, D.C., in 2014, to help answer this question. "We mentally plan for two years," he told me. Poffenberger came to Rohr's work in 2009, after working as an activist and becoming disillusioned by the political system in Washington. He attended one of Rohr's wilderness men's retreats (it involved drum circles) and began to follow his teachings. Poffenberger has been attempting to apply the principles of movement ecology, the study of what makes social movements succeed, to Rohr's wide-ranging ideas. "It's not just about one's own individual spiritual journey," he said. "It's how that's tied to social transformation." He is hoping, for example, to harness Rohr's large following in support of youth climate strikes and the Reverend William Barber's Poor People's Campaign. Perhaps, Poffenberger thinks, as

adherence to traditional religions dwindles, social action will become a more relevant form of spiritual practice. On the morning before I left Albuquerque, I sat with the two men in Rohr's office, which is crowded with statues of dancing Shivas and other gifts from admirers and friends. They began talking about Rohr's penchant for icons, which hang on the walls of his hermitage and office. He has forty depictions of Jonah being consumed by a whale, including several funky renditions, and he identifies with the prophet. "I've been held safe and spit up on the right shore while preaching a message that no one wanted to

hear," he said. He is also a devotee of ancient Christian iconography, and of iconography from the Eastern Orthodox Church—both of which offer a glimpse into religious thinking that is not dominated by contemporary Western dogmas.



One of his favorite images is Andrei Rublev's fourteenth-century depiction of

the Holy Trinity, in which Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit form a balanced triangle, none more important than the other. "Until we get the Trinity right, our metaphysics is off," he told me. "We pulled Jesus out of the Trinity, gave him a white beard and white skin." Rohr has heard that, on the original, which is hanging at the State Tretyakov Gallery, in Moscow, there's a residue of glue. "I'm convinced it was a mirror," Rohr said. In his book, he describes the Cosmic Christ as a kind of mirror, in which we can see the form of all of creation. "The Christ mirror fully knows and loves us from all eternity, and reflects that image back to us," he writes. He believes that Rublev's work evokes this metaphor, inviting the viewer to see herself not as fallen and cut off from God but as an integral part of the divine.

God, Lord of all creation, lover of life and of everything,
Please help us to love in our very small way
What You love infinitely and everywhere.

We thank You that we can offer just this one prayer
And that will be more than enough,
Because in reality every thing and every one is connected,
And nothing stands alone.

To pray for one part is really to pray for the whole,
And so we do.

Help us each day to stand
For love, for healing, for the good,
For the diverse unity of the Body of Christ and all creation,
Because we know this is what You desire:
As Jesus prayed, that all may be one.

We offer our prayer together with all the holy names of God,
We offer our prayer together with Christ, our Lord,
Amen.

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