
Review of Olav Hammer, ed., *Alternative Christs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

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Olav Hammer's *Alternative Christs* is similar to Jaroslav Pelikan's *Jesus through the Centuries*: this volume provides a summary of a wide variety of reinventions of Jesus from the first century to the present. However, two things make *Alternative Christs* stand out as distinct. First, whereas Pelikan's book focuses on what are primarily mainstream versions of Jesus within the "orthodox" Catholic and Protestant traditions, Hammer's collection investigates the Jesus of the early apocryphal literature, the Jesus of the European enlightenment's esoteric traditions, and the Jesus from the planet Venus who rode on UFOs to visit us on earth. Second, Hammer's volume is somewhat less "phenomenological" in its approach, as its contributors sometimes engage in critical commentary.

The book begins with Hammer's introductory remarks and closes with an essay by Hammer reflecting on some "meta" issues related to how alternative versions of Jesus are legitimated as authoritative by those who create or support them. The intervening chapters each take up and summarize a specific alternative Jesus, such as the Manichaean Jesus, Jesus in Islam, Hinduism, or Mormonism, and Jesus in various esoteric, theosophical, or New Age traditions. The contributions are almost evenly divided between American and European scholars. Notable contributors include internationally-known New Religious Movements scholars James R. Lewis and Mikael Rothstein.

Hammer makes it clear that the "alternative" in *Alternative Christs* implies "alternative to the mainstream" Christian versions of Jesus, but not alternative to the "true" Jesus. In fact, just about every appearance of the word "orthodox" in the book is accompanied by scare quotes. Hammer insists in the introduction and the conclusion that the "true Jesus" cannot be known: the canonical gospels "are documents of faith rather than history ... [E]ven the earliest accounts of the life of Jesus interlace whatever historical kernel they may contain with abundant legendary material" (p. 1). This is a sticking point for Hammer, and it is repeated by a number of the contributors: since the canonical gospels are mythical and legendary, there is no intrinsic reason why they (or the "orthodox" forms of Christianity based on them) should carry more authority or legitimacy than the "alternative" versions of Jesus covered in this collection. Hammer puts it this way, following his discussion of one early twentieth century reinvention of Jesus: "No obvious measure of plausibility would seem to make the proposition 'Jesus was dead for several days, and was then brought back to life' more readily acceptable than 'Jesus was the name given to two different boys, whose identities merged at age twelve.' Nevertheless, the former proposition is seen as historically accurate by many Christians, whereas the latter ... apparently occasioned considerable consternation" (p. 289).

In a review I cannot consider survey every Jesus covered in the book — there are thirteen!—so I will consider one outstanding chapter. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke's chapter, "The Aryan Christ: The Electrochristology of Ariosophy" presents a Jesus designed by Jörg Lanz in the early twentieth century to provide a supernatural legitimation for an ideology of racial purity. Goodrick-Clarke shows how Lanz brought together a number of elements: social Darwinism, archaeological discoveries demonstrating the Assyrian and Babylonian antecedents of the material in the Hebrew Bible, beliefs about racial purity, and popular ideas about the nature of electricity. The resulting product of this amalgamation was a myth about a pure, Aryan, godlike race at the origin of civilization, a godlike race that vaguely had some sort of electrical powers. Unfortunately, some of these creatures were breeding with animals, which of course resulted in racial degradation. In order to put a halt to racial degradation, the ancient Israelites made a pact with Yahweh, which forbade them from breeding with animals or neighbouring (degraded) races. "[T]he Old Testament or 'covenant' was the sacred contract between the Aryans (i.e., the ancient Israelites) and God to exterminate the beast-men,

abjure any further acts of miscegenation, and to create ‘the sons of God’ on earth. It was a practical eugenic policy for the breeding of a superior human race” (p. 226). This group too decayed over time, which was why God had to send a mixed electrical being — Jesus — in order to renew the covenant with the Aryans. The death and resurrection of Jesus symbolically represented the death of his beast side: “the Eucharist meant the sacrifice of the beasts, the castration of the inferior, so that the sons of God could arise from the ‘dead’, that is the *Anthropozoa* [the races mixed between electric Aryan and beasts]” (p. 227). Many of Jesus’ miracles in the canonical gospels, such as his transfiguration, were read as events resulting from his electrical powers. Goodrick-Clarke’s chapter is *Alternative Christs* at its best: he shows both *how* this version of Jesus could have appeared (i.e., what local historical ideologies Lanz could have drawn from for his reinvention of Jesus) and *why* this version of Jesus could have appeared (i.e., it could easily be aligned with a growing racist ideology).

One of the weaknesses of *Alternative Christs* is that some of the chapters tend to focus on the logical or theological coherence of the account of Jesus considered. In particular, the chapter on the Manichaean Jesus by Jason BeDuhn devotes a considerable number of pages to attempting to show how this Jesus, strictly speaking, is not exactly subject to the charge of docetism, due to its particular metaphysical assumptions about the nature of reality and the nature of Jesus. Why does this topic necessitate such careful consideration? This might be of interest if one were engaged in apologetics — the logical consistency of a theological position is clearly relevant to theologians. But if readers of this volume are neither insiders nor engaged in disputes with insiders, it’s unclear why these concerns are relevant.

Similarly, the conclusion of the chapter on Jesus in Hinduism seems to have its agenda set by the concerns of inter-religious dialogue, rather than strictly scholarly concerns. The author of this chapter, Bradley Malkovsky, shares questions posed by Hindu appropriations of Jesus (which tend to portray Jesus as one among many avatars, and who may have appeared in multiple times and in multiple places): “Should the possibility be ruled out that Christ has appeared to Hindus or that very different experiences of Christ — by those of other faiths — are possible? And how do Christians respond to the challenge ... that modern biblical exegesis is powerless to prove that the Christ of official Christian dogmatics is in fact the authentic one? And what, finally might Christians learn from Hindus with their very different interpretations of Christ?” (p. 167) It appears that these are not only the questions of those he is writing about, but also his questions. But it is unclear to me that the concerns of religious insiders should set the agenda for scholars, especially in cases where the conversation is over whose tradition is more authentic.

Another weakness is that the critical concerns posed by the editor, which frame the volume, are not considered by each contributor. That is, Hammer has what I take to be an excellent scholarly agenda, but the agenda does not appear in every essay. Hammer’s questions, which are also mine — i.e., how do these versions of Jesus reflect their socio-historical context, how are they legitimated, and what social work might they accomplish? — appear in less than half of the essays in the volume.

Last, I would like to mention that the chapters on the alchemical, esoteric, and theosophical traditions were difficult to follow. It is unclear whether this was due to the lack of clarity of these chapters or my lack of prior familiarity with these traditions. Apart from these chapters, I found the book to be marked by a high degree of clarity.

Most of the chapters do not represent groundbreaking research on the topics they cover; rather, they are better described as survey essays. Readers who have a prior familiarity with Christianity in late antiquity, for instance, will probably find nothing new in the chapters on the Gnostic, apocryphal, or Manichaean Jesus. The volume seems intended rather to survey the sheer breadth of versions of Jesus. Consequently, it will likely be of interest primarily to scholars thinking critically about syncretism and innovation in religious traditions on the one hand, or New Religious Movements on the other. Due to the accessibility and clarity of most chapters, this book would serve

well as a resource in undergraduate and graduate courses considering the wide variety and evolution of Christianity.