
The diverted spirituality of “False Christ cults”

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Abstract

Spirituality is a general term used to refer to one’s belief system and lived expression. It is a broad term and has been used to formulate different forms of spiritual expression. In the Christian context spirituality is defined as a life based on biblical faith that originates from a trust in and personal relationship with Christ. Pseudo-Christian groups especially False Christ cults presume, based on the claim of the leader being “Christ”, that they are Christian and therefore their spirituality is also Christian. This study investigates the spirituality of False Christ cults compared to Christian spirituality to find the resemblances and differences and found them lacking since the presence of the persona of a so-called “Christ” inevitably changes the essential faith aspect of Christian spirituality namely faith in the redemptive work of Christ. Salvation through Christ is replaced with some manmade religious system of the “modern-day Christ”.

Opsomming

Hedendaags word daar na ’n persoon se geloofstelsel en geestelike uitdrukking verwys as sy/haar spiritualiteit. Spiritualiteit is ’n wye term en kan baie vorme van geestelike uitdrukkings insluit. In die Christelike konteks verwys spiritualiteit na die persoon se geloofsuitdrukking gebaseer op bybelse geloof wat ’n oorsprong het in ’n persoonlike

vertrou in en verhouding met Christus. Pseudo-Christelike groepe en in besonder Valse Christus kultusse neem aan, gebaseer op die eis van die leier dat hy "Christus" is, dat hulle spiritualiteit ook Christelik is. Hierdie studie ondersoek hierdie eis om vas te stel wat die ooreenkomste en verskille is met christelike spiritualiteit en het tot die slotsom gekom dat hierdie groepe te kort skiet deurdat die teenwoordigheid van die moderne Christus persona juis die kernaspek van geloof in die soendood van Christus van die volgelinge ontnem. Die verlossing deur Christus word vervang met die selfgemaakte godsdienstige stelsel van die hedendaagse "Christus".

1. Introduction

In recent decades the term "spirituality" became a more appropriate term to describe a person's belief and existential expectations of life on earth and thereafter. It is a broad term not belonging to Christianity only but also includes humans' quest to find meaning and purpose in life. For some spirituality is an inward discovery of the inner "self", an opportunity to get in touch with the core of their existence, to others it describes an interaction with a higher personal being, energy, or force. All forms of spirituality can be more distinctly defined by a particular belief, set of beliefs, or philosophy deemed to be truthful by its adherents. The belief or philosophy provides the basis for an understanding and interpretation of life as a whole, including interactions with the spiritual world leading to an individual's particular response or expression.

Spirituality is more distinctly defined by the philosophical or religious content making it a religious, secular, new age, African, or Indigenous spirituality to mention a few. Religious spirituality in general refers to groups that find their foundation and reference in a belief system related to a higher being. Among these are mainstream religions including Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. The spirituality of these groups can therefore respectively be described as Islamic, Judaist, and Christian spirituality. Deviations in doctrine are common amongst religions and as a result, spirituality will also be amended. One example of such adaptation relevant to this study is religious groups claiming to be Christian while upholding an altered doctrine to the accepted biblical doctrine. These groups are generally referred to as pseudo-Christian groups or cults based on the level of deviation from Christian doctrine and the type of demands placed on followers. The variation in doctrine is mainly necessitated

because the biblical context is replaced with the group's context and outcome as well as the status of the leader. This justifies an altered interpretation and application of the Bible to serve the particular existential belief of the group. A further category of pseudo-Christian cults is those groups that have a leader who claims to be a reincarnation of Jesus Christ, a Messiah or God, referred to as False Christ cults.

In light of the aforementioned, the question this article endeavors to investigate is the nature of the spirituality of False Christ cults. How does it differ from Christian spirituality and how does it impact the spirituality of followers?

2. What is meant by Christian spirituality?

According to Schneiders's broad definition of spirituality (1989:684) it is "the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives". In the context of Christian spirituality, self-transcendence aims at laying off the compulsive, addictive, selfish patterns of behaviour and taking on behaviour nurturing a relationship firstly with Christ and secondly with other persons, that bear the image of His grace (Thompson, 1992). It further believes that God is inherently involved in the world, and people serve as an extension through which God acts (Neal, 1987). The ultimate goal is that God revealed in Jesus Christ may be experienced through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Christian spirituality is differentiated from general spirituality encompassing different spiritual experiences by the generic criterion that it is based on a relationship with Christ expressed visibly in an outward lifestyle confirming an encounter with Jesus Christ. McGrath (1999:3) describes it as "... referring to how the Christian life is understood and the explicitly devotional practices which have been developed to foster and sustain the relationship with Christ ..." There can be no relationship with Christ if a person has not been transformed and renewed by the Holy Spirit – known as been born again (John 3:3).

McBrien (1994:1058) elaborates on the relationship with Christ which results in the transformation of the believers' understanding and grasp of the vastness of God and His providence and will in life (Rom 12:1-2). It is not an encounter with some impersonal life force, impulse towards creativity, or a kind of magnetic force but with the personal Christ that enables the unique spiritual experience through the Holy Spirit that quickens the truth, communicates, guides, and makes the Holy presence of God known to

believers. As the believer becomes more aware of the vastness of God through the interaction with His word, the teaching of the Holy Spirit, or an external expression of God's revelation, the believer's reciprocal response and action to that signifies a spiritual experience.

A fundamental aspect of Christian spirituality is that spiritual experience cannot replace faith or subject faith to a spiritual experience that supersedes the boundaries of Christian doctrine and belief. Christian spirituality rather signifies the level of spiritual growth in the knowledge of God within the confines of the Bible message, through prayerful study, devotion, and guidance by the Holy Spirit. These experiences may take on different forms including a dream, vision, insight in the scriptures, or a miracle. Oversight of the content of these experiences through earnest evaluation thereof in terms of the Bible message and the Christian belief system must safeguard against sacrilege. Another criterion is that the impact or result of such an experience should always edify, correct, reproof, instruct, and develop the Christian character and advance the personal relationship with Christ. Whenever God meets with an individual, they are not only left with a better understanding of God's will but also inspired to commit to His will. Christian spirituality is not man-made and is not possible except through the grace of God which implies His presence and empowerment (Patrick, 1988).

A personal relationship with Christ is the foundation for Christian spirituality expressed in a voluntary response as a result of God drawing a person through the impression or stirring of God's word by the Holy Spirit and not as a result of legalistic rules or practices or any form of coercion. Sheldrake (1991) explains Christian spirituality as a conscious response to God's grace impacting not only the personal life of the believer but also the ecclesial. This life is enabled through living in the Spirit.

2.1 The foundation for Christian spirituality is the Word of God

Although the term spirituality in general signifies to many a "freedom" of creating one's own belief as pointed out before, Christian spirituality is confined to the unaltered word of God as found in the Bible. There is no freedom to compose one's spirituality to suit one's desires. This form of spirituality seems to be driven by and for the lustful desires of the human flesh and will lead to destruction. The concept of freedom in the context of the overarching biblical message refers to the freedom from the penalty of sin and the pending wrath of God only possible through the sacrificial work of Christ. For this reason, spiritual oversight has been provided to ensure sound biblical doctrine firstly through scripture, the Holy Spirit, the body of

believers, and lastly through the spiritual elders called by God (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Such oversight safeguards against so-called new revelation that adds to or subtracts from the message of the Bible. In the book of Galatians, such alterations to the gospel are referred to as “another gospel”. False teachers referred to as Judaizers targeted the early gentile believers in Galatia and their strategy was not to discard or to replace the gospel message but to add to it an element of the law to be more effective.

The account in the letter to the Galatians provides clear guidelines for action with regards to any deviation or amendment of the gospel message preached by Paul that Christians are saved by grace, through faith, through Christ alone (Eph. 2:8-9). The deceit in this case came from a so-called religious group known as Judaizers that taught that circumcision according to the Law of Moses is needed to complete salvation. Based on the evidence available they could have been “Judaizers” that originated in Jerusalem, most likely Pharisees (Acts 15:15) or regenerated and unregenerated Jews who taught strict adherence to the oral traditions of the Rabbis (Mk. 7) which are now, documented in the Mishna and the Talmud as well as the 613 mandates found in the Mosaic Law (Acts 15:1-35) (Wenstrom, 2002). The focus of their teaching was directed at new Christians recently added to Gentile Christian churches (Longhenry, 2015). It seems that they wanted to correct the erroneous teaching of Paul that did not teach the Gentiles to obey the Law of Moses (Acts 15:5) but also encouraged the regenerated Jews to cease following the Law of Moses (Acts 21:21).

There seem to be two possible reasons for the Judaizer’s insistence on circumcision as part of salvation. Firstly, for a political reason to avoid being persecuted by the Romans (Gal 6:12-13). They probably reasoned that the inclusion of circumcision in the plan of salvation would give the pretense that these believers were part of Judaism and enjoyed the tolerance of the Roman government (Long, 2011). According to a decree issued by Octavian Augustus, the Roman Emperor around 31 BC, Jews were afforded the freedom to observe the Sabbath and retain their traditions and customs, including kosher dietary customs, and escape persecution (McDonald, 2021). The Asian Jews were well aware of the Roman Empire’s view on subversive religions or groups that were watched with suspicion and wanted to avoid being associated with subversive groups and therefore to safeguard themselves as expelled Jewish Christians from their synagogues that could in any way place their Jewishness in question (Keener, 1993:762). Secondly, the Judaizers were afraid that the steadfast belief of the Christians and the resulting growth in followers could eventually lead to their detriment and their

decline in followers. The Judaizers’ insistence on keeping the law whilst they did not keep it themselves seems to be for boasting in those whom they did convince to follow the law, or even an attempt to keep Judaism alive (Gal 6:13).

Paul’s response to this heresy is clear and certain. *“Even if we or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached let him be accursed. As we have said before I say again if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received let him be accursed”* (Gal 1:8-9). None are authorized to change or add to the true gospel not an apostle or even an angel from heaven. Paul was probably also reminded of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 24:3 warning against false teachers in the last days commanding them to take heed that no one deceives them as many will claim to be Christ and deceive many. Warning against false prophets and teachers abound in the New Testament. Paul encountered them in his missionary work; so did Peter and we are warned and informed about them and how a follower of Christ should address them (Matt 7:15; 2 Pet 2:1; 2 Cor 11:13; 1 Tim 4:1; Gal 2:4; Jude 4).

False Christ cults seem to follow a similar strategy to deceive people by proclaiming that the accounts of Jesus’ life and work in the Bible are distorted and misrepresented, preparing a void to bring their “real truth” which also makes the work of Christ nil and void.

3. False Christs and false Christ cults

False prophets are well-known in the Bible since Old Testament times generally referring to those “prophets” who claimed to speak for God but what they proclaimed did not come to pass. Jesus taught about the deception that would continue through false teachers and prophets but added also those that would come in his name claiming to be “Christ” after him and deceive many (Matt 24:4). The environment in the first century seemed to be conducive for the appearing of “Christs” possibly for at least two reasons. Firstly, among the Jews, many did not recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah and were still expecting Him to come making them vulnerable to a false Messiah that promised freedom and peace in times of trouble. Secondly, young Christian believers like those in the church of Thessaloniki because of their interpretation of Jesus’ teaching that this generation will not pass away until these things take place including His imminent return (Matt 24:34) leading to idleness (2 Thess 3:6-12). The Jew’s non-acceptance could lead to being deceived by a false Christ but in the case of the young Christians,

although deception was possible it was not likely, since they were expecting the Christ they had accepted and were familiar with and also received clear teaching with regards to His return.

The warning of Jesus about false Christs is clearly defined and does not refer to a misunderstanding of the time of the first Christ's return but to those that will present themselves as Christs who are false imposters. Their appearance is not limited to the Jews although they may start amongst them but will expand throughout the world. Jesus' warning materialized soon after His ascension as the book of Acts reports on Theudas who claimed to be somebody and had a small following that perished and was dispersed after a while; also Judas of Galilee (Acts 5:36-37), then Simon the sorcerer that was seen by his followers as a man with great power of God (Acts 8:9-11) and also Elymas (Acts 13:6-10).

A little further along in history before the time of the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD false Christs misled people by saying look here or there is the Christ to deceive even the elect if possible (Matt 24:23). Josephus's writing refers to many deceivers with the destruction of the Temple looming that exploited people in Jerusalem's desperation for an outcome by deluding them "*under the pretense of Divine inspiration that was in fact for the procuring of innovations and the changes of government. These men prevailed with the multitude to act like madmen, and went before them into the wilderness, pretending that God would there show them the signals of liberty*" (Matt 24:23-24) (Flavius Josephus, 1895:2.259). Josephus also reported about an Egyptian false prophet who had a following of thirty thousand people that he led around from the wilderness to the mount which was called the Mount of Olives (Flavius Josephus, 1895:2.261-262).

Many false Christs continued to appear even after the destruction of the temple through the ages to date not only amongst the Jewish people but all over the world. Some claim to be the Jewish Messiah others the Christian Jesus. Closer to our day in the twentieth and twenty-first century, some of these false Christs include Sun Myung Moon (1920-2012), José Luis de Jesús (1946-2013), David Koresh (Vernon Wayne Howell) (1959-1993), INRI Cristo (1948), Sergei Torop (1961), and AJ Miller (1962) to mention a few. These false Christs, their belief system, and their followers constitute what can be called a False Christ cult.

A False Christ cult with its distinctive characteristics falls within the category of pseudo-Christian cults. A pseudo-Christian cult can be defined as "... a group, church or organization whose central teachings and/or practices are claimed to be biblical or representative of biblical Christianity, but which

are unbiblical and not Christian" (Apologetics Index, 2017). They further claim to consider the Bible to be authoritative but manipulate the Scriptures [or create a new message to the Bible] to fit their belief system. Although they may claim to follow Jesus Christ, and even use the same terminology orthodox Christians use, their definitions are vastly different. They deny or distort fundamental Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and salvation by grace through faith alone (Christian Research Institute, 2009).

As the name False Christ cults indicate they are distinguished from pseudo-Christian cults by going one step further and claiming to have a leader who is either a reincarnation of Christ, the second coming of Christ, a messiah, or even God. This claim inevitably adds several important aspects that deserve to be pointed out, firstly the leader "becomes Christ" among his followers. Secondly, the aspect of the leader's absolute calling leads to his followers' wholehearted obedience without any proof of the truth of his claim from scripture except the warning from the same that there will be many false Christs (Matt 24:23-24). Thirdly, the change in where the followers' worship is directed. Fourthly, new substitutional salvation replaces redemptive salvation to accommodate the False Christ scenario that has no justification in the Word of God.

3.1 False Christ cults dynamics and spirituality

Cults are known for their controlled environment because of the unethical coercion, intimidation, threats, physical and verbal abuse, dishonesty, sexual bullying, excommunication, separation from friends and family, and forfeiture of personal finances and belongings to proselyte and control followers (Langone, 1993; Zimbardo, 1997). Further to the aforementioned traits, the impetus of False Christ cults lies in the belief that followers are following "Christ" in reality which provides a sense of superior distinctiveness to the group (Joseph, Salande & Perkins, 2011). If the truth of the group is challenged it is dismissed since "Christ" the author of the truth is amongst them. Salvation is now in the hands and power of the reincarnated Christ. These False Christ cult leaders as bearers of absolute truth often reinforce their view through repetitive cult doctrines, prescriptive orders, subliminal messages, and actions based on their standing that not only led to the detachment of followers (Goldberg, 1997; Zimbardo, 1997, MacHovec, 1992) but also from faith in the first Christ of the Bible.

Crawley (2016) refers to Michael Foucault's (1926-1984) concept of circular interdependence these leaders create in isolated groups through power,

truth, and submission. False Christ cults not only legitimize the subjectivity of members to cult rules because of the personage of the leader but also enforce it through reward and punishment. The subjectivity of the members signifies that the leader, in this case “Christ”, is in power and means that he decides how truth is manifested and results in members making no distinction between the scripture and their lifestyle as they believe they are living the truth and, in this case even more so by “following Christ”. Therefore, obeying the leader’s decisions is the “truth of God”. The leader further maintains a good handle on his authority by being unpredictable keeping followers unaware neither what he will do next, how he may react, or what his next demand is going to be (Lalich, 2004).

Three important, yet not exhaustive, aspects mark False Christ cults namely: the rejection of the biblical account of Jesus’ life and thus also his mission and work, a claim to be “Christ” of the modern-day with a special calling and the formation of a new message or gospel for salvation that corrects the “unreliable” message of the Bible.

Three False Christ cults will be investigated briefly to determine their teaching and spirituality. These include Alan John Miller from Divine Truth¹ known as Jesus of Australia, Alvaro Theiss a Brazilian Astrologer known as Inri Cristo² also claiming to be a reincarnation of Christ and Sergei Anatolyevitch

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- 1 AJ Miller or the Jesus of Australia with his partner Mary Suzanne Luck the Mary from the first century who witnessed him dying on the cross heads up the new truth of God known as the Divine Truth. Miller was always aware of recollections of a previous life that went as far back as more than two thousand years. After battling this recollection, he decided at the age of forty-one that he is indeed a reincarnation of Christ with a mission namely to teach God’s truth and to set the record straight on the distorted message of the Bible. AJ Miller started the cult know as Divine Truth that is located near Kingaroy in Queensland, Australia where approximately one hundred followers live with an online following estimated at twenty thousand. Millers’ teachings show many similarities to the teachings of Padgett’s (2011) *Gospel of Truth and Light to mankind*, to which he replies that he has given that insight to Padgett.
 - 2 Alvaro Theiss or Inri Cristo, is a 66-year-old man from Brazil that believes he is the reincarnation of Jesus Christ since 1979 when he was on a religious fast in Santiago, Chile. Although he always followed a powerful voice in his head from childhood it was during the fasting in Santiago that the voice told him, “I am your father. The God of Abraham, of Isaac, and Jacob.” He received the mission as the reincarnated Christ to prepare the elect, to survive the inevitable nuclear hecatomb that will end this chaotic world, for a new earthly society to be established according to the Creator’s will. He spent 35 years travelling the world teaching and has hundreds of followers, mostly women. He has established his own church SOUST – (Suprema Orden Universal da Santissima Trindade) in Brasilia, that he refers to as “New Jerusalem” (Iaccino, 2014).

Torop known as Vissarion³ the Jesus of Siberia who claims he is the second coming of Christ.

3.1.1 Rejection of the gospel accounts of Jesus' life mission and work

In False Christ cults, the message or account of Jesus' life in the Bible is incorrect or deliberately distorted by evil men or revisionists and leads to a misrepresentation of Jesus' life and work. The starting point of these “false Christs” is to cast a shadow of doubt on the reliability of the gospel accounts to present “the truth”, their truth. AJ Miller of Australia points out the fallibility of the gospel accounts allegedly about him as follows:

There are some Truths in the Gospel accounts, both about my life and my teachings, but, unfortunately, there is also quite a lot of misrepresentation, misunderstanding, purposeful deceit, and error contained within those same accounts. Unfortunately, at the time of my death, even many of my disciples still did not clearly understand what I was teaching them, and they often held onto their own error-based opinions and had clear disagreements with me about what I was teaching. Also, there are many essential things about my life that are not contained within the Bible, and that have been purposely misrepresented, not by the original writers, but by the revisionists. Many of these revisionists did not have loving or pure intentions, and they had personal agendas for the manipulation of facts to suit themselves (Miller, 2011a:1)

Miller (2013a) claims that since the Bible is about him and his life, he knows what is true and what is false. He also knew and met the writers personally who wrote bits and pieces and even had discussions with them about what was true and which parts were fabrications. The true part resonates with him since he experienced it himself and probably because it fits in with his new message.

³ Sergei Torop the Messiah of Siberia Vissarion Christ – the Teacher, of the Church of the Last Testament originally started as Church of United Faith, is known by about five thousand of which two thousand followers live in the rural settlement of the cult in Petropavlovka over an area of about three hundred kilometers, convinced that he is the second coming of Jesus of Nazareth, that came back to earth to save the world. Vissarion had that realization in 1991. He lives in an isolated southern part of Siberia in a community known as The Abode of Dawn with his second wife Sofia Torop and their six children, north of the Mongolian border. He and thousands of followers established a colony in this remote part of Siberia, where they lived for roughly three decades before the government operation in 2020 when he was arrested for extortion and emotional abuse (Elliot, 2020). Vissarion has written a twelve volume of the Last Testament for the salvation of his people (Vissarion, 2020a). The church of the Last Testament believes in aliens, UFOs, condone suicide, and believes Vissarion has the gifts of healing Aids and cancer by the laying on of hands (Sinclchikova, 2020)

Vissarion, Jesus of Siberia's twelve-volume Last Testament consists of thousands of pages that contain a large amount of information that Vissarion accumulated when he was on earth in the 1st century including events in his life which he presents to correct the account of the gospels (Vissarion, 2020a). It is a New Age text with a set of principles, focused on self-improvement, self-governance, and community also retelling the true story of the New Testament (Hopkins, 2021; Sinelschikova, 2020). It is a mixture of cosmology, Christianity, Buddhism, and yoga (Castoro, 2011). Although the Christian message is placed in the leading role, he perverts it to fit his agenda (Schwabe, 2003). According to Vissarion, there are three testaments, The Old, the New, and the Last Testaments that are meant to bring the children of God to the Kingdom of Heaven (Vissarion, 2020a). The Last Testament is meant to change the old perceptions about Jesus as is clear from Vissarion's statement "If you want to stay at the level of comprehension which you had two thousand years ago, then stay, where you are" (Vissarion, 2020a par. 6). Vissarion teaches that the Heavenly Father is the creator of the material universe that is neither good nor bad and also created the human soul. Heavenly Father is – the creator of good, and the source of the Spirit of Life, which joins with the energy of the Heart of Mother-Earth, to generate the Son of God. Hell, as well as paradise, exists. There's an evil virus, that lives only on earth among people that originates from the devil generating sinful intentions and evil thoughts in people. People are eternal beings.

INRI Cristo of Brazil explains the distorted message of the gospel that found substance in different forms. The Christian belief is commercialized and a fusion of pagan traditions:

It is fundamental that the diligent and sincere searcher dodge prejudice and from the reasoning padlocks (the dogmas) in order to discern between the real Christ, the revolutionary historical personage that divided the history of humanity, and the folkloric commercial Christ of the so-called Christian religions, originating from the fusion of beliefs and pagan myths, used by the owners of power as a tool for manipulating the faith and alienating the human minds (Cristo, 2009:6).

According to INRI Cristo, many saw him when he walked the earth but only a few knew who he was including his disciples that is why he had to return to teach what humans were not prepared to understand two thousand years ago (Cristo, 1982e). One of the important fallacies that INRI Cristo points out in the gospel accounts is the belief that Jesus' was resurrected physically. This misunderstanding of Jesus' resurrection in the so-called Christian belief system is responsible for

the collapse of the world. He corrects the wrong belief that Christ has risen physically, possibly stemming from pagan traditions, by giving a lengthy explanation of why he only rose spiritually, and also why he reincarnated from earth and not from heaven (Cristo, 2020).

3.1.2 *False Christ's Special Mission*

False Christ's all claim to have returned to earth with a special mission. The claim to be “Christ” suggests to the followers the status of the leader as “anointed one” and “saviour”. Once the belief that the leader is a reincarnation of Christ is established, followers inevitably submit to the so-called Christ to worship him which includes obedience to his teaching. Their behaviour is aligned with what is meant by worship “to express an attitude or gesture one's complete dependence on or submission to a high authority figure, do reverence to, kissing their feet” (Bauer, 2000:882).

After AJ Miller and his earthy partner Mary Suzanne Luck (reincarnated as Mary Magdalene) died in the first century they departed to the spiritual world where they lived as spiritual beings for more than 1900 years (Miller, 2011c; 2013b). In the spiritual world, they obtained knowledge on the process of returning to earth (Miller, 2011a). This process is called reincarnation but differs from other forms of reincarnation⁴ (Miller, 2011b). In his early thirties, Miller started to

4 Miller explains that a person has a soul with a physical as well as a spiritual body. When a person dies, they go to the spiritual world where they live on forever. They go to the spiritual world leaving behind their physical body and only the spiritual body attached to the soul goes there. The spiritual world has twenty-two dimensions. The dimension where a person will end up in the spiritual world is determined by how well they have developed in Divine Truth, Divine Love and humility. Most people according to Miller ends up in the first dimension, some in the second dimension and only a handful in the third. All dimensions up to dimension six are self-reliant on the persons own efforts to develop. Dimension seven is where a person becomes at-one with God and loses their spirit body and their soul becomes at-one with God. It is only after they have reached dimension seven that a person can come back to earth if there is a need otherwise, they can develop on in the spiritual world and never have to come back. According to Miller there has never been reincarnations as other religions believe meaning a cycle of life and death in history. It is impossible to effectively come back to earth because when the spirit body still attached to the soul returns to earth and attempt to find a physical body on earth, they can enter they cannot find it. Since spirits still have their spiritual body attached to their soul if they attempt to enter another body, they over cloak it because the spiritual body clashes with that physical bodies' spiritual body. If that happens it causes disease and sickness and can eventually lead to death because the spirit may have had a disease. Millers' reincarnation thus seems to differ from other religions reincarnation based on the fact that a persons' return is not an attempt to better themselves or improve their karma as in the case of Hinduism and Buddhism but because they have developed to such a spiritual level that is above the levels on earth to perform a service of

give more thought to the belief that he is Jesus based on a series of unexplainable memories throughout his life. Memories of somebody putting nails through his feet and wrists and being speared, threatened, and beaten on several occasions almost to the point of death. Giving thought to these memories and wondering whether he is Jesus led to his conviction later at the age of 41 that he is indeed Jesus and His mission was to spread the Divine Truth or God's Truth (Morgans, 2017). Miller explains that his return must not be seen as the second coming of Jesus as many Christians believe since the passages in the Bible that Christians refer to are incorrectly interpreted. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24 must be understood in the context of two thousand years ago when he first came to this earth. Christians' attempt to bring 1st-century occurrences into modern times believing they will happen again in the modern age is a grave mistake (Miller, 2013d).

Similar to Miller INRI Christo also had a strong voice in his head since his childhood of being a special person but it was during a religious fast in Santiago, Chile in 1979 that it was revealed to him that he had the same identity as Christ crucified two thousand years ago, the Messiah that humanity is not yet prepared to receive (Cristo, 2020). In Chile, the voice said to him: "I am your Father. The God of Abraham, of Isaac, and Jacob." INRI seemed to know already of his mission to the new world on his way to Golgotha "... when I walked to the Skull, He showed me the terrible destiny reserved to the humanity, but also the inheritance of this new earth, huge, of exuberant nature, where there is abundance. It is foreseen in the Bible that I would reappear in the New World, 'I saw a new heaven and a new earth'" (Revelation 21:1-2) (Cristo, 1982e:par 19). INRI therefore has "returned upon earth in flesh and bone, not directly from heaven, as the "evanjackasses" (INRI's created word meaning foolish) assert, but reborn from the womb of a woman (Cristo, 2020:par 2). He is the same Jesus just with a new name – INRI – *Jesus Nazareus, Rex Iudaeorum* – "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews". INRI justifies his return to the flesh reminding people about what he said about two thousand years ago at the last supper. He said that he would drink wine with his disciples at his return in flesh (*Matthew c.26 v.27-29 and Mark c.14 v.24-25*),

a high level as developed spiritual beings. The difference then between Millers' concept of reincarnation and other religions' concept is that it refers to highly spiritual developed spirits not struggling sinful underdeveloped spirits in the case of other religions. According to Miller such sinful underdeveloped spirits cannot return to earth (Miller, 2012a; Miller, 2012c). Miller cannot do miracles now because he started on a lower level when he reincarnated and is developing spiritually to the level he was before (Miller, 2013c).

a spiritual body cannot drink wine (Luke c.17 v.25 to 35), that he would be reproached by people, to be reproached he needs to be in a physical body and that he would return with a new name (Revelation c.3 v.12) (Cristo, 1982d).

Vissarion, which means "he who gives life" also known as the Teacher claims that he had a revelation that he is the second coming of Jesus Christ on August 18, 1990, when the Holy Spirit appeared to him in his studio and told him that he is the son of God. He founded the Church of United Faith now known as the Last Testament in 1991. According to some of his followers, Vissarion's recollection also goes back more than two thousand years recalling things not recorded in the Bible such as his love to paint, his love for peaches, birds, and flowers, and small things he made to give to Roman soldiers. Part of his special mission seems to be the reinvention of a new holy day on 18 August which is annually celebrated as the feast of the good fruits known as the Church of the Last Testaments' easter (Castoro, 2011; Burnett, 2024). Also, the calendar was reinvented to run from 14 January 1961 the date of his birth which is also the day on which they celebrate Christmas to correct Christian's misunderstanding. Vissarion states that he is not God but the living word of God the Father. God the Father speaks all the things He wants to say through him (Ishak, 2020). Although Jesus of Siberia has a biological mother he considers Mary of Jesus as his mother.

3.1.3 *Another salvation*

The belief that the leader is a reincarnated Christ, the second coming of Christ or Messiah necessitates a new teaching that fits this scenario. In the case of AJ Miller, he claims that his death as Jesus Christ more than two thousand years ago on earth was not an atonement for humankind's sin. When asked by a journalist if he would die for humans' sins again he responded by saying that he never died for anyone's sins. "The reason they killed me the first time was because they saw me as an enemy of the state. There was no sacrifice on my part, and there was no purpose from God" (Morgans, 2014:par 14).

According to Miller "salvation" will come progressively the more a soul is awakened to their sin and error and discovers what the Divine Truth (God's Truth) and Divine Love are and desires to accept it with humility. Because souls have free will and are the creators of sin, they need to become aware of and be willing to confess their sins and errors before any redemption can take place. Once awakened to their

sin and error and the harm it has caused and willing to repent of it God's divine love can flow to them through the Holy Spirit which acts as a conduit for God's love. God rubs that confessed sin away and his divine love starts to flow leading to spiritual development (Miller, 2015b). Through this ongoing relationship with God that has started, they will ultimately progress through stages of spiritual development eventually becoming at one with God or being "Christed" which seems to mean becoming a "Christ" themselves similar to the condition Jesus (AJ Miller) attained in the first century. This condition is also within reach for any person and millions have reached it in the spiritual world after death. This condition also includes becoming the source of all truth, love, happiness, and information about the universe and how it operates without the need for intermediaries, such as Jesus' atonement or priests (Miller, 2013b, Miller, 2023). Divine Truth which leads to salvation contains three principles for a personal relationship with God namely a human must develop humility, must pray for Divine Truth (God's truth), and then also pray for and allow God's divine love to saturate their soul. Humility speaks of a human's soul's need to function on an emotional level since God's soul is emotional, a true relationship with God is thus only possible through an emotional bond with God, and not a mental-based connection (Miller, 2013a). Prayer is the way to find God's universal and personal truth, an expressed desire for a sincere emotional and not intellectual longing towards God for his Love (Miller, 2013a; Miller, 2015a).

A follower's destination after death "is completely dependent on the person's life in the flesh, decisions, choices, feelings, emotions, beliefs and love and how they understood and lived Divine Truth (called "soul condition" or development) while living on the earth" (Miller, 2011b:1). Since all of these things are unique for each individual, then the actual events after a person dies in the spiritual world will be very personal and unique.

INRI Cristo views the Bible from a metaphysical point as a book of dead letters, fables, legends, parables, and metaphors and we need the help of the Father if not we will fall into the same sin those people in the Bible committed. He seems to fulfill the role of revealing the dead letter to his followers as the truth it was meant to be. INRI Cristo seems to promote a cycle of reincarnation similar to Buddhism and an evolutionary process as a way to achieve salvation. According to Cristo (1982b:par 1) "depending on the karmic heritage of previous incarnations a person brings with **will determine the circumstances**

of "re-birth". If the process of evolution is harmonious all the spirits, before the stage of human beings, first pass through apes, in other words, the spirits that reincarnate at the right time will have to pass through apes but as a result of the many sins of humankind this process is interrupted and spirits precociously reincarnate now direct in a human body (Cristo, 1982c). **A person's experience in the present life is the result of their good or bad actions (karma) in the past. Everyone gets what they deserve. "It's up to each one to make use of intelligence, developing the wisdom to provide a favorable karmic situation to continue the journey on Earth which seemingly includes the new Earth.** Inspiration to discover and explore your potentialities, for the hidden virtues waiting for the maturation of the spirit to bloom, should be asked from the ALMIGHTY" (Cristo, 1982a:par 3).

People's sublime, divine side of intelligence needs awakening to enable them to do good works, strive to live the great human virtues, and keep noble, elevated, selfless thoughts putting into practice the teaching of INRI. To attain salvation, they should use the mechanism of karma to work in their favour. They need to strive to find the Kingdom of God first through the teaching of INRI to find **happiness, and personal satisfaction, and reach symbiosis with the Almighty Supreme CREATOR and only LORD of the Universe** (Cristo, 1982a:par 7).

Vissarion explains that his death and resurrection were not the essence of salvation but were pointing to the need for the self-denying fulfillment of his laws, in which he manifests himself to help humans because this is the only way from which the resurrection to true life becomes possible (Vissarion, 2020b:par. 44). Salvation is acquired by selflessly fulfilling Vissarions' word and instructions locked up in the Last Testament and The Last Hope that allows him to become master in the hearts of his followers (Vissarion, 2020b:par. 51). Self-denying fulfilling of these laws include obedience to the strict instructions such as wearing an austere wardrobe, abstaining from meat, eating flatbreads, and only eating fruit and vegetables grown in their gardens consisting of potatoes, honey, grains, and mushrooms. No smoking, drinking alcohol, money exchange, or any bartering is permitted. Celebrating Christmas on Torop's (Vissarion's) birthday seems to be another requirement for salvation as well as the holiday of good fruits which takes place on 18 August every year known as their easter to celebrate Vissarion's second coming (Traynor, 2002; Schwabe, 2003; Colgrass, 2009). According to Vissarion the ultimate

aim of a human is to learn how to reach immortality of the soul and live eternally (Traynor, 2002).

The fulfillment of the laws includes the migration of followers' souls through the reincarnation cycle that continues ten times on earth affording the person opportunities to develop spiritually and grow in divine love each time to eventually reach enlightenment equal to being in paradise. Those who are unable to develop spiritually will end up in hell. With the Last Testament followers of Vissarion are also encouraged to pray the new common prayer at least two times daily in the morning and the evening. The prayer is a reinvention of the Lord's prayer in the Bible to serve the goals of the Last Testament Church. This prayer will strengthen the link of the follower with the heavenly Father (Vissarion, 2020a). Vissarion's message of hope came at the exact right time with the economic collapse, and the disintegration of the USSR, which left people without hope and broken. His ideas on how to find purpose and hope made sense in the context of a collapse of the known and the prospects of living in a remote self-sustained environment away from the brokenness of this world (Sinelchikova, 2020). The world will end with a flood and only those who belong to the cult will survive and go on to inherit the promised land, the earth, and the universe (Sellmann, 2015).

4. False Christ cults' spirituality evaluated

The spirituality of False Christ cults is henceforth compared with several important aspects of Christian spirituality to determine similarities and differences.

4.1 In Christian spirituality the person of Jesus Christ as a man but also God that came with an explicit mission sent by the Father to this earth is central to the message of the Bible

Jesus came to proclaim the kingdom of heaven first to His people and later through the apostles also to non-Jews. Jesus' mission was characterized by teaching and correcting the diversions of the teachings and beliefs of the religious elite of the time such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, and other leaders, to proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven, demonstrate the power of God to heal, deliver from demons, raise from the dead and set people free from the bondage of sin. The mission culminated in the death and resurrection of Christ as victor over sin, hell, and the grave making a way for humankind to

follow. Without this mission and atoning accomplishment of Christ, there is no hope for the salvation of humankind.

False Christ cults reject most of the biblical account of Jesus Christ's life, mission, and accomplishment on the cross and in so doing also reject the salvation plan of God. The person of the first Christ is restructured in a different form in all of the above False Christs as a resolution to the distorted account in the Bible that Jesus' death and resurrection was for the salvation of humankind.

The impact of the self-afforded right of these "false Christs" not only to declare that the Gospel accounts are distorted but also to correct the gospel accounts opens the door for every and all alterations as they see fit. Furthermore, it creates a distrust in the validity of the Bible causing followers to submit to the leader's teaching only. Followers become wholly dependent on the leader to understand the Bible and trust the leader's every word on it.

4.2 Christian spirituality stems from the foundation of salvation through grace alone by faith alone in Christ (Eph. 2:8-9; Rom 4:13)

Salvation is based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. All have sinned and owe the wrath of God and can only be saved from God's wrath through Christ's redemptive work (Rom. 3:23-24; 6:23). There is no other way to escape the wrath of God than through the gift of God in Christ Jesus (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). Scripture is clear that salvation and the right standing with God is only possible through a personal surrender and acceptance of the gift of grace through Christ our saviour. It entails full submission to the Lordship of Christ and the guidance of His word and the Holy Spirit. The emphasis is on personal, no one else can obtain salvation in your place, nor can another human claim to be a redeeming agent on another individual's behalf.

False Christs display an overriding authority to sanction another salvation through works that determine the followers' earthly as well as eternal destiny. Kernberg (1976:16) points out that well-assimilated cult followers display a primitive idealization of the leader. Through this "primitive" idealization of an unrealistic "all good" and "powerful image" of the leader the classic cult behaviour of blindly following an "all-good" or "all-powerful" charismatic leader is established (Joseph, Salande & Perkins, 2011:388) even more so if the leaders' claim to be "Christ" is recognized.

The new message of salvation replaces the atoning death of Christ (Matt 27:32-56; John 3:16-17; 1 Pet 3:18-20) with becoming one with God through human efforts – becoming divine is achievable through acceptance of the Divine Truth, God’s truth without the need for intermediaries (Siegel, 2013). It is not through a physical offer for sin but through an emotional relationship and bond with God (Miller, 2013a). The laying off of emotional deficiencies opens the way to becoming one with God. Salvation as well as the experience after death is individually unique. Those who are not saved will end up in the lowest level of the 1st dimension in the spiritual world known as hell (Miller, 2011d).

Salvation in the case of INRI comes through acceptance and submission to the “new Christ” and reincarnation. Those who are saved will be the sheep that are separated from the goats. The sheep represent those who recognize INRI CRISTO and his divine cause but also embrace the divine cause and stay connected to him eternally. The goats represent those who are not ready to assimilate INRI CRISTO’s reality and succumb to the influence of pharisaical temples (Cristo, 2009:22)

Vissarion teaches that salvation from the wrath of God can only be attained through living in this religious community called the Ark or the Last Testament Church and through upkeeping of his laws through reincarnation cycles that ultimately result in reunifying with God (Nemtsova, 2012).

4.3 Christian spirituality originates out of a born-again experience and renewal by the Holy Spirit leading to a submissive relationship with Christ

The aim of the behaviour change is that the image of Christ will mature in the believer. The believer’s focus changes from the earthly to the things above where God is, this is the result of dying with Christ in his death and having a life hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:2-3). The expressed life is not self-centered but outward portraying the characteristics that belong to a godly life, forgiving one another and allowing the peace of God to rule in one’s heart. Desiring and allowing the Word of God to richly dwell in one’s heart doing all things in word or deed in His name (Col. 3:12-17). It signifies a life led by the Holy Spirit. Being crucified with Christ we no longer live but the risen Christ lives in us (Gal. 2:20). Christian spirituality aims to lead believers to be conformed to the image of Christ (Gal. 4:19). We are his workmanship created in Jesus Christ for good works which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10).

Another important aspect of Christian spirituality is an outward expression that is described as shining the light of the gospel in the world and being the salt of the earth. To proclaim the kingdom of God as representatives of His kingdom. The lives of Christians display the saving grace of God in their lives so that others may be drawn unto Christ, "Let your light so shine before men, that they see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:13-16).

In the case of AJ Miller, INRI Cristo, and Vissarion reference to the Holy Spirit is with regards to their calling and not in the renewal or salvation of the followers, except for the Holy Spirit being a "conduit" for God's love. Instead, Miller (2012b) teaches his followers that the spirits of the deceased could come and speak to them and the more developed ones can guide them. He illustrated to his followers in Brazil how to communicate with spirit guides. During this occasion, Mary became a channeler through which the spirits of dead people spoke and Miller answered their questions about reincarnation. All aspects of false Christ's salvation respectively are based on self-reliant salvation, emotional abilities, and membership in a particular group. Their form of outreach into the world is not to lead people to Christ as in Bible times but to proselyte followers for the group's kingdom which seems to be the only hope to escape God's judgment. Being part of a group that either lives in geographic isolation away from the world or social isolation enforced by the prescriptive teaching of the group subtly signals the saving power of membership to the cult kingdom.

4.4 Christian spiritual experience does not supersede the boundaries of Christian doctrine

The lived life and experience of the believer are always measured by and evaluated against the Word of God. The scriptures as a closed canon are sufficient not only to safeguard from heresy but also to direct in God's good acceptable and perfect will. The guidance of the Holy Spirit sent as helper and intercessor for the believer will bring in remembrance all the things that Jesus said (John 14:25). The Holy Spirit will lead the believer in the truth and not speak on His authority but whatever He hears He will speak of; He will take of what belongs to Jesus and declare it (John 16:13-15). There is no need for extra-biblical revelation, everything needed is contained in Scripture and is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness that the man of God may be completely thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17).

In the False Christ cults discussed above the Bible is not at the center of

their teaching although reference is made to it. Only selective parts are used for some reference in the formation of their new message. The Bible further does not prescribe the belief system of the followers nor is it the source of guidance and direction for the false Christ since their new flexible teaching supersedes the Bible where necessary.

The premise of these cults' spirituality is founded first and foremost on the belief that the leader is "Christ". This settled belief in the minds of the followers not only changes their perception of their realized salvation and faith but also drastically alters their expressed spirituality from devotion to the first Christ to devotion to the second "Christ". They seem to abandon their former insufficient belief system to submit to the new belief system of the modern-day Christ. The new teaching of the "modern-day Christ" although it is not biblically founded is justified and accepted because of the "all-powerful" idealization of these leaders.

5. Conclusion

Cunningly and progressively False Christs convince followers of the reality of them being the "Christ" of the Bible. Their expressed purpose is to correct the deceit about the first Christ and His mission based on the unreliable accounts in scripture. Without this corrective change to the accounts in the Bible, their deceit is exposed. They offer their new message and plan of salvation to save those deceived ones from the pending wrath of God. Because they are believed to be Christ, followers submit to and trust in them for their salvation. The results are that the reincarnated Christ or Messiah takes the place of the first Christ. The worship of the followers is no longer directed to the first Christ sitting at the right hand of the Father from where he will return but to the "reincarnated Christ". A self-reliant salvation replaces a redemptive salvation through the finished work of Christ. There is no need for regeneration by the Holy Spirit. To be "born again" seems to refer to the process of the human soul being transformed into being Divine, the process of becoming at one with God. The modern-day Christ diverts the followers' focus away from Christ and his salvation. Without this essential element, it cannot be Christian. If evaluated the claim to be "Christ" is unsubstantiated because of their different lifestyles, salvation, sexuality (first Jesus practiced celibacy), attitude towards material things, different teachings, and their denial of what the first Christ did to name a few. If they are not the real Christ their belief and message are neither Christian. Their spirituality is not founded on a personal relationship with the first Christ through spiritual

regeneration and can therefore never be described as Christian but rather as Pseudo or False Christianity or even as a set of New Age beliefs under the banner of Christianity.

The Bible clearly states and warns that those who come and present themselves as "Christs" in whatever form are false Christs and imposters. Jesus will return to earth as his disciples saw him leaving the earth (Acts 1:9-11). His return will be accompanied by a shout, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God (1 Thess 4:16; 1 Cor 15:51-52; Rev 1:7), and every eye will see him.

Another remarkable aspect of the three False Christs discussed above is several similarities but also their opposing doctrine. They all claim to be the Christ of the Bible who lived more than two thousand years ago and deny that they are false Christs (Matt 24:4) because the Almighty confirms their identity and gave them a new name because the old name was abused by Christianity to enrich themselves (Cristo, 1982e). They all have recollections of their life two thousand years ago and therefore know that the gospel accounts are distorted. When they received their calling, they heard from God that they were the "son of God (father)". Similarly, they justify why they are here now. Their teaching on salvation entails the idea of becoming one with God but through different paths. Miller teaches that a person ends up in a spiritual world after death while Vissarion and Inri Cristo refer to a new earth that will be populated after either a flood or nuclear bomb respectively has destroyed the earth. Miller differs from Vissarion which claims to be the second coming of Christ. He denies that he (Miller) ever said that he would return to the earth later. According to INRI Cristo, it is a sin to invoke the spirits of deceased people as it will prevent them in the trajectory that was destined for them after their disembodiment (Cristo, 1982f). Miller teaches his followers that they may communicate with spirits. All claim to be the same Jesus yet they differ in teaching, salvation, eschatology, and lifestyle. The burning question is; which of the three has the truth and exactly what is the truth? There is only one truth! The truth of the Bible. Anyone that teaches another gospel let him be accursed.

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