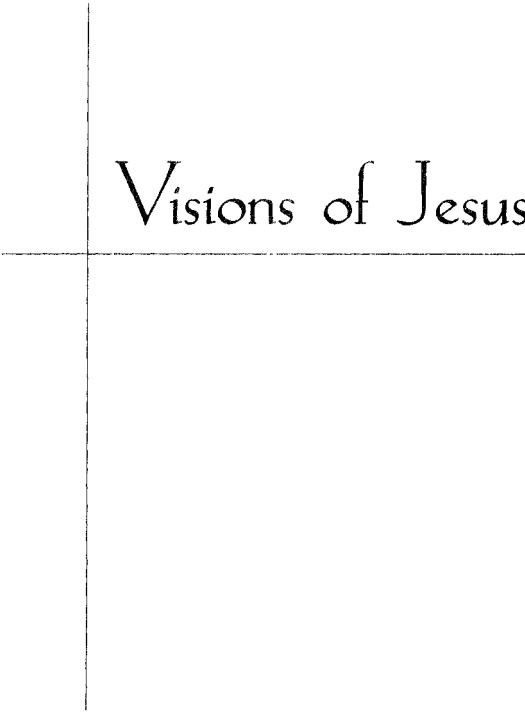


# VISIONS OF JESUS

*Direct Encounters from the New Testament to Today*



PHILLIP H. WIEBE



# Visions of Jesus

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Direct Encounters from the  
New Testament to Today

Phillip H. Wiebe

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

New York Oxford

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York

Athens Auckland Bangkok Bogotá Bombay Buenos Aires  
Calcutta Cape Town Dar es Salaam Delhi Florence Hong Kong  
Istanbul Karachi Kuala Lumpur Madras Madrid Melbourne  
Mexico City Nairobi Paris Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto

and associated companies in  
Berlin Ibadan

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First published by Oxford University Press, Inc., 1997

First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 1998

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Wiebe, Phillip H., 1945–

Visions of Jesus: direct encounters from the  
New Testament to today / Phillip H. Wiebe

p. cm. Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 0-19-512669-6 (Pbk.)

1. Jesus Christ—Apparitions and miracles. 2. Visions.  
I. Title.

BT580.A1W54 1997 248.2'9—dc21 96-39445

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America

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## Preface

Vision and apparition experiences in which people believe they encounter Jesus Christ have been reported among Christians for two thousand years. The original Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus was based primarily upon experiences in which followers thought they had seen him in some posthumous form, for the mere disappearance of his body could hardly have given rise to this belief. Christic visions continue to be experienced by people living today—among laity and clergy, Catholics and Protestants, devout and casual believers, old and young, women and men, well and poorly educated, and among those who “believe in” visions as well as those not predisposed to do so.

The purpose of this book is to examine this phenomenon. I direct much of my attention toward thirty people who described their experiences to me. For some, the experience takes place in an altered state of consciousness as the familiar world of which they are a part suddenly disappears and another “reality” seems to descend upon them. For others, the Christic figure enters their ordinary lives and is superimposed, as it were, on their world. A few even say that this has been witnessed by groups. The information available challenges many stereotypes about the Christic visionary experience, and poses difficult questions about their explanation. It also brings an important perspective into the work of the scholars who have wondered what events, if any, might lie behind the stories found in biblical literature.

The contemporary visionaries who claim to see Jesus attach



no great significance to the places where the experiences occur, unlike those who experience apparitions of the Virgin Mary. Lourdes, Fatima, and now Medjugorje, are legendary because of the Marian apparitions reported there. But there are no shrines of comparable popularity that commemorate apparitions of Jesus. The significance of Christic visions and apparitions seems to be felt primarily in the enriched religious lives of those who experience them.

This study would not have been possible without the cooperation of the persons who allowed me to interview them about their experiences. I gratefully acknowledge their contributions, which are presented in Chapter 2.

I have benefited from the encouragement and critical comments of friends and colleagues in undertaking this study and writing this book. I wish to thank Sarah Coakley, Doug Chaffee, Gary Colwell, Bob Doede, Craig Evans, Philip Gosselin, Irving Hexham, Hugo Meynell, Ron Philipchalk, Karla Poewe, Chris Rowland, Richard Swinburne, Judy Toronchuk, Don Wiebe, and Carol Zaleski. All have read my work at one stage of its development, and have offered helpful comments. I gratefully acknowledge the expert guidance of Cynthia Read, Executive Editor at Oxford University Press, and copyeditor, Norma McLemore.

This project could hardly have been completed without the research grant that I received from my university, as well as the sabbatical leave during 1993. This leave, combined with the hospitality of the University of Oxford, allowed me to write much of this book. I gratefully acknowledge the generosity of my university, the kindness of Sarah Coakley and Richard Swinburne at Oxford, and the opportunity afforded me by Laurie Brown, also at Oxford, to address the Alister Hardy Centre for the Study of Religion about Christic visions.

My family has been patient with me during this research project. I take pleasure in acknowledging the support of my wife, Shirley, and of my children.



# Visions of Jesus

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## Introduction

Jim Link was watching a movie on television one evening in his home in Newmarket, Ontario, when the screen suddenly became invisible. The first thought that occurred to him, which he knew to be absurd, was that maybe he had watched so much television that he had become blind! He next realized that he was unable to hear the television set, and he thought, "Have I been watching so much TV that it is affecting my vision and my hearing?" He stood up to look out of the window next to him just to make sure his eyesight was still intact, but he couldn't see the walls. It seemed as though he was enclosed in a curtain, but he couldn't really see a curtain. A human figure then came into view at the end of the room, starting with an outline that became clearer and clearer, until he could see someone wearing long robes and sandals. He wondered, "What's going on here? Who is this? What is this?" The figure turned to face Jim, extended an arm, and beckoned him three times to come to him. Jim immediately thought to himself, "That is Jesus!" and the lines came to him from the New Testament, "Come to me all you who are weak and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." He thought to himself, "It's real, then, it's real. I have to ask for forgiveness and repent and receive him." At that instant everything in the room returned to normal, and he decided to become a Christian.

The figure that Jim saw was of average height, and seemed to be situated about fifteen to eighteen feet away. The robe that the figure wore was a dark blue or a purplish blue, Jim was not sure. What impressed Jim most was the royalty of the appea-

ance and the way the figure welcomed him. The figure wore a hood that prevented its face from being seen, so Jim could not report anything about facial features. Jim had been wondering about the meaning of life, what his purpose in life was, and whether he was just on earth to work and maintain a home and watch television! He had been attending church with his wife, just to please her, but having this experience, at twenty-seven years of age, changed his outlook on life.

Jim had another experience in 1977, some fifteen years later, one evening after a Bible study in the home of his brother-in-law. He was sitting at the kitchen table, just having had coffee and something to eat. He discovered that as he tried to get up he was unable to move. He turned to tell his brother-in-law sitting several feet away about this sudden inability to move, but he could not see him. All he could see was the face of one he took to be Jesus "from sort of three-quarters of the way down his forehead to just below his chin, just as clear as you're sitting there right now." The radiant or glowing figure seen as Jesus had a beard and brown shoulder-length hair, and looked like the popular images of Jesus in pictures. Just to convince himself that he was seeing something genuine, Jim looked away and then looked back again to see if the figure still was there, and he was able to do this several times. Jim was the only one in the room who could see him, however. As he got up a few minutes later to go home, he was flattened by a force that pinned him to the floor. For about three hours he was interrogated by this being about what he valued most—his job, his family, his wife, his possessions, and so on. The others in the group watched in awe but said nothing. They heard Jim's responses, but not the questions that were put to him. His brother-in-law wanted to come over to him to pray with him, Jim reported, but could not do so—it was as if an invisible line had been drawn across the floor that he could not cross. Jim describes the second experience as having confirmed his decision earlier in life to be a Christian. Jim does some oil painting as a hobby, and in the front entrance of his home hangs a painting of a biblical scene in which he tried to capture the likeness as he had seen it.<sup>1</sup>

What are we to make of experiences like these? Do these visions have no more ontological importance than nocturnal dreams? Was Jim only imagining the figure that seemed as real as life? Was he experiencing what

Catholic theology describes as an imaginative vision, produced by an angel or by some similar spiritual being? Was it, alternatively, what Catholic theology describes as a corporeal vision, involving the use of the eyes? Were these “appearances” of Jesus comparable to the appearances described in the New Testament (NT)? Were these experiences similar to the many apparitions reported by psychical researchers during the last one hundred years? Was Jim momentarily insane, as he expected others to think, and experiencing the hallucinations of insanity? Do such experiences suggest a transcendent source of some kind, or can the conceptual resources of the maturing neurosciences be counted on to explain them? These are some of the many questions that such reports evoke.

“Visual encounters” with a being taken to be Jesus have been reported since the earliest days of Christianity. In fact, the Christian belief that Jesus was resurrected seems to have been based largely upon the reports of appearances of him after his apparent death by crucifixion, for the report of an empty tomb by itself would hardly have given rise to the Resurrection belief. Christic visions and apparitions have been reported during the entire history of the Christian church, but little critical study of their characteristics and evidential significance has been undertaken in recent years. The central purpose of this book is to describe and critically reflect on the phenomenon of Christic visions and apparitions, particularly the experiences reported to me by living visionaries.

## Reasons for Studying Christic Visions and Apparitions

Karl Rahner remarked several decades ago that a critical examination of apparitions (in general) in Christian history had yet to be undertaken,<sup>2</sup> and this seems to be true with specifically Christic apparitions as well. Although many studies of religious experience have been conducted since William James’s seminal work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Christic apparitions have not been the focus of much critical attention. Marian apparitions (apparitions of the Virgin Mary), by contrast, have been well studied, both by those within the Christian church for whom such experiences have spiritual significance and by sociologists interested in religious phenomena.<sup>3</sup> G. Scott Sparrow’s recent study of various Christic encounters, including visions and apparitions, is a rare attempt to describe the range of Christic experiences; he also mentions that they have not been extensively studied.<sup>4</sup> It seems clear that certain kinds of visionary experiences have religious significance, although these visions and apparitions need not be interpreted this way. Experiences generally considered to have religious significance are those that give intimations of a transcendent

dimension to life, give meaning to life, awaken the moral sense in a person, or evoke a sense of the Infinite.<sup>5</sup> Christic apparitions have obvious religious significance when evaluated in this light, and deserve to be studied along with other kinds of religious experiences.

Deirdre Green argues that theistic mysticism, of which Christic apparitions would be one kind, has been neglected in the Christian church, compared with monistic mysticism.<sup>6</sup> Monistic mysticism, according to Green, sees the ultimate goal of religious life as ascent to the contemplation of the formless Divinity. This kind of contemplation uses no ideas or images, but understands God as different from anything else in our experience (the *via negativa* approach). Theistic mysticism, by contrast, focuses on a personal God known in a loving relationship and conceived in an anthropomorphic form. Green observes that theistic mysticism was largely rejected by Christian mystics such as John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart who knew both forms, although it was of course ardently embraced by such famous visionaries as Teresa of Avila and Julian of Norwich. This study, then, investigates a kind of experience that seems to have been neglected, at least within the Christian church. It should be noted that Jewish mysticism is generally understood to include visionary experiences. One scholar defines mysticism in the Jewish tradition as “diversified forms of direct realizations of divine presences, whether on earth or in heavenly domains.”<sup>7</sup> I will not generally describe the experiences under scrutiny in this book as mystical, except where the usage of others requires it. I prefer to use the term *mystical* to refer to experiences without perceptual content, in keeping with a well-established convention in philosophical writing.<sup>8</sup>

A second reason for undertaking this study is to explore the possibility that contemporary phenomena might contribute to the understanding of the NT accounts of the post-Resurrection appearances and visions of Jesus. For well over a century scholars have closely examined these NT accounts, but little attention has been given to the possibility that present-day visionary experience might provide help in understanding them. There are exceptions of course. Michael Perry considers in *The Easter Enigma* the relevance of paranormal phenomena to biblical claims, and Wolfhart Pannenberg mentions in *Jesus—Man and God* the possibility that parapsychological phenomena might shed light on the visionary experience. Carol Zaleski recently made a similar point about the relevance of near-death experiences (NDEs) to theological views. She remarks that for scholars of religion and theologians to refuse to examine the near-death literature “is only to widen the gap between academic theology and popular religious concerns. The result is a loss for both sides; not only does the public lose the benefit of historically informed discussion, but theology is

deprived of a potentially revitalizing connection to contemporary experience.<sup>9</sup> Extra-biblical literature that describes Christic visions, such as early gnostic writings and the devotional literature of Christendom, might also be illuminated by the study of contemporary Christic visions.

Another reason for undertaking this kind of study is related to the common belief that religious experience is evidentially relevant to belief in God. One popular argument for the existence of God is the argument from religious experience. This argument in its simplest form contends that the best explanation for certain kinds of experience widely understood to be religious in character is that they are produced by God. Richard Swinburne, perhaps the best-known present-day philosopher defending the rationality of Christian theism, recently endorsed this argument as one among a number of important probabilistic arguments.<sup>10</sup> Caroline Franks Davis has also defended the value of the argument from religious experience, although she is speaking to a general theism, rather than specifically Christian belief.<sup>11</sup> She considers six categories of experience as supportive of theistic belief, including quasi-sensory, visionary, revelatory, interpretive, regenerative, and numinous experience, drawing her examples from Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam.

Caution should be exercised in arguing for an obvious and strong connection between Christic visions and the existence of God. Opponents of theism evidently reject the claim that religious experience provides impressive evidential support for theism; they may grant that such experience occurs but deny its cogency for theism. It is possible that the relation between religious experience and theistic belief has been misconstrued by theists; alternatively, it is possible that the supposed lack of evidential support arises from the fact that not enough evidence has been collected. In that case, this study and others like it could contribute to our knowledge of experiences that have probative force for theism.

Another reason for caution in linking Christic visions and the existence of God is that various theories concerning the relationship between Jesus and God have been propounded by Christians of the first few centuries and by various philosophers and theologians whose views have been considered heretical or marginally tolerable by the Christian communities. One could come to believe, for instance, that Jesus was resurrected and still exists, but not believe that one Supreme Deity exists. In view of the gap between the Resurrection belief and Christian theism, one could take a more modest view of the evidential value of apparition experiences. Janice Connell, writing of the Marian apparitions reported at Medjugorje, says that their significance is broadly metaphysical: "The great illusion that the world of the senses is the only reality is gradually being eroded by the shared testimonies . . . of spiritual realities



so powerful that people are willing to give their reputations, their fortunes, even their lives, in defense of a transcendent reality they claim they have experienced."<sup>12</sup> Christic apparitions could be viewed as having similar potential to erode a materialistic world view and to advance a broadly transcendent one. At the very least we can say that Christic visions and apparitions belong to a group of experiences widely considered to have some evidential import for transcendent interpretations of the universe.

Yet another reason for undertaking this study arises from the possibility that all of the experiences to be discussed are wholly subjective (or hallucinatory) and therefore provide information about one important kind of altered state of consciousness. Just what constitutes a hallucination is a matter of considerable dispute, but it is readily conceivable that Christic apparitions, like other apparitions, are best understood using the theoretical constructs of modern psychology. Anthropologist Weston La Barre writes that "there is no 'supernatural' psychic event in tribal life anywhere that may not be better understood as a dissociated state—whether endogenous dream, vision, trance, REM state, sensory deprivation, hysterical 'possession'—or as an hallucinatory activity of the brain, under the influence of exogenous psychotropic substances."<sup>13</sup> If such an appraisal of apparition experiences should turn out to have the greatest plausibility, then detailed descriptions of the experiences themselves would give us important information about one kind of human experience, which the neurosciences would then need to explain.

I have chosen to direct my attention to present-day experiences for two central reasons. The first is that many of the reports that have been advanced in the history of Christianity are essentially devotional literature, and as such generally include neither the attention to detail nor the critical evaluations that characterize studies that attempt to be exact and objective. Though some visionaries, such as Teresa of Avila or Julian of Norwich, do include self-critical remarks and provide a fair amount of detail, they are the exception. A review of the many accounts of Christic visions found in Brewer's *A Dictionary of Miracles*, Walsh's *The Apparitions and Shrines of Heaven's Bright Queen*, or *I Saw the Lord* by the Huyssens provides ample evidence of a general lack of detailed description or criticism. Sparrow provides some detail in his accounts of recent experiences, and thus makes a useful contribution to a description of the phenomenon.

The second reason for directing my attention to current experience is that it *appears* to have an evidential force that older material lacks. I advance this reason with some tentativeness because it touches on controversial and unresolved issues in the assessment of confirming evidence. This can be illustrated by comparing a biblical account of a post-Resurrec-

tion appearance with a brief account of another contemporary Christic apparition.

Luke 24:36-43 describes an incident in which Jesus was seen by his disciples soon after his Resurrection. In order to alleviate their doubts and fears that he might be just a spirit, Jesus instructed them to feel his flesh and bones, and he then ate some food. If recent nonliteral interpretations of this story are set aside, and the traditional view that Luke narrates an event is accepted, many questions are still left unanswered. One might wonder about Luke's source for this event, since he himself does not seem to have been present. If Luke's source was the terrified disciples, who apparently believed in ghosts, their reliability as reporters might be suspect. Questions could also be raised about the reliability of memories or oral histories during the thirty- or forty-year lapse between the alleged event and the time Luke wrote it down. Finally, one might wonder about the view of the world that Luke and his contemporaries shared, what criteria for factual correctness they held to, what ontological assumptions they uncritically accepted, and so on. The sheer temporal distance between us and the early Christians who circulated the original stories—more than nineteen hundred years—provides ample opportunity for doubts, many of which can never be allayed.

Compare this event with one described by Christian psychiatrist John White. He says that as he prayed with some friends, he saw the arms and hands of Christ extended toward him. He says that his eyes were open, that he was fully aware of his surroundings, and that his experience was in three dimensions and full color.<sup>14</sup> White and his account are still available for critical scrutiny in a way that Luke and his narrative are not. That White intended his description to be the report of a historical event can be established beyond reasonable doubt, but given the kind of criticism developed with respect to gospel "narratives" in the last century or so, Luke's intentions might not be. We can probably establish White's standards of factual correctness, given his availability for questioning and his training as a doctor and psychiatrist, but we are significantly hampered in trying to determine the standards of "physicians" in Luke's day. Authoritative views can be formed about the kind of world view that White endorses, both by reading his work and talking with him, but comparable information about Luke is a matter of guesswork. The plethora of critical views among biblical scholars demonstrates the caution with which the gospel accounts must be approached.

Even if we should decide that contemporary accounts are inauthentic, more in them can be critically examined than in those ancient accounts that lie beyond our grasp. Philosophers who have studied the nature of confirming evidence generally hold that no difference exists in *evidential*

force between descriptions of ancient events and modern ones, and they might well be correct, but there certainly is a difference in *psychological* impact. Whatever the explanation of the difference might be, some greater evidential potency seems to lie in more recent phenomena, and I accordingly direct my attention primarily to them.

## Scope of the Present Study

Because of the importance that “visual encounters” with Jesus have had in the Christian faith, both at its inception and in its subsequent history, I have decided to narrow my focus to experiences of primarily a visual kind. The people I have sought out believe (1) that they were awake at the time of their experience, (2) that their eyes were open, and (3) that it was Jesus who appeared to them. Many other kinds of experiences might be considered Christic, both by those undergoing them and by theologians evaluating their significance. Among these are dreams in which people encounter Jesus, out-of-the-body experiences (OBEs) in which people believe they saw Jesus, NDEs in which people believe they met Jesus, experiences in which people sense what they take to be the presence of Jesus but do not see anything, experiences in which statues of Jesus are thought to move, to sweat, or to shed tears,<sup>15</sup> and Christian conversion experiences.<sup>16</sup> I do not include any of these kinds of experience in my study, nor do I include auditory and other nonvisual perceptual experiences, except as they accompany visual ones. This list of exclusions alone gives an indication of how rich and varied such religious experiences are. I am restricting my attention in keeping with a methodological suggestion once made by William James and more recently advocated in a study of psychokinesis by philosopher Stephen Braude, that human qualities are best studied in their extravagant manifestations so that their moderate instances can be seen as instances of the extreme.<sup>17</sup>

A question arises concerning the most appropriate term or terms to describe the phenomena I am examining, if in fact just one or two terms should be used for that purpose. Perhaps these phenomena should not be grouped together, even though they bear more than superficial similarity to one another, because they might belong to different causal orders. Some of the experiences, for instance, took place in what appeared to percipients to be a different physical location from where they thought themselves to be, while other experiences took place in surroundings that were familiar to percipients in every way except for the figure that appeared to them. To use the same term to describe these phenomenologically different experiences is potentially misleading because the explanations for

them might ultimately be quite different. I have nevertheless chosen to use the terms *vision* and *apparition* interchangeably, leaving open the possibility of different classifications for the various kinds of phenomena.

The terms I have chosen are not without difficulties, but other possible terms are problematic in their own way. *Hallucination* is generally taken to refer to experiences that are subjective in character, whereas *appearance* carries the connotation that the experience is objective, and I naturally do not wish to prejudge the question of subjectivity or objectivity by my choice of a descriptive term. Moreover, NT critics use *appearance* to refer to those stories in the gospels in which the body of Jesus is experienced as “substantial” or “solid,” and *vision* to suggest that the object in the percipient’s visual field is ephemeral, rather than real. Ian Stevenson suggests *idiosyncratic perception* and *idiophany* (from the Greek *idios* meaning private, and *phainomai* meaning appear) for apparition experiences of people who are normal,<sup>18</sup> but some of the experiences presented below are alleged to be group experiences.

The advantage to using *vision* and *apparition* is that both terms have been used to refer to the kind of experience under examination, although *apparition* is used mostly by theologians who follow the tradition within Catholic scholarship. It is perhaps of interest to note that *apparition* is not found in the usual Protestant Bible, but is used in two Old Testament (OT) apocryphal books that are part of the Catholic canon, II Maccabees 5:4 and Wisdom 18:17.<sup>19</sup> *Apparition* also implies experiences involving visual perception, for it is derived from the Latin *apparere* meaning “to come or to be in sight.”

One more comment about terminology is needed. I will generally use the proper name *Jesus* to refer both to the historical figure described in the NT and to the being whom visionaries think they have encountered, and I will use the adjective *Christic* to modify nouns such as *vision* or *apparition* simply because there is no suitable adjectival form of *Jesus* to perform this function. I will not generally use *Christ* as a proper name. Theologians have long debated Christology and the relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, and I do not wish to get entangled in that debate merely by choice of expressions.

## Assumptions and Outline

I have made it clear, I trust, that I will present descriptions of phenomena without prejudging whether they have a reality existing apart from and independently of a percipient. I will attempt to approach this question as objectively as I can, although I am haunted by William James’s observa-

tion that "belief follows psychological and not logical laws. A single veridical hallucination experienced by one's self or by some friend who tells one all the circumstances has more influence over the mind than the largest calculated numerical probability either for or against."<sup>20</sup> While I have not personally had the kind of visionary experience described here, my objectivity could be affected in other ways, not least because of my close contact with a sizable number of people who have had such experiences. Deirdre Green considers mystical experience to be a prerequisite for studying mysticism, in her broad understanding of the term,<sup>21</sup> but I can also see how such experience might affect one's objectivity. I shall indicate in several places below that my limited direct acquaintance with aberrant perceptual experiences has restricted my understanding of the experiences of others.

Addressing the problem of aberrant perceptions is impossible without saying something concerning the problem of skepticism about the external world, bequeathed to modern philosophy by the ancient skeptics and Descartes. The general public may not know very much about philosophy, but one can generally count on members of the public to expect philosophers to be unsure about the reality of ordinary objects that most people unhesitatingly believe in. This expectation has undoubtedly been abetted in this century by metaphysical theories such as idealism and phenomenism, which consider ideas or sensory perceptions to be the only realities, in terms of which everything else has to be constructed. These theories have been abandoned by many philosophers, and in the last two or three decades philosophers have increasingly sought to integrate scientific findings with the kind of conceptual analysis and the evaluation of foundational beliefs that have been central to philosophy for centuries.

In the current philosophical climate the existence of a world of physical objects requires no defense. But numerous issues remain that need further resolution, including the mechanisms involved in perception, the neurophysiological basis for representation of external objects and their properties, the basis for shared concepts and communication about perceptual experience, and the criteria by which illusory experiences can be identified. I will assume that some form of critical realism gives us an approximation to the truth about the world and about humans as perceivers. I therefore accept that there are physical objects existing apart from us, that the ultimate constituents of them are the complex atomic structures investigated by physicists, that ordinary beliefs about physical objects are subject to error, and that our causal relationships as perceivers to physical objects are discoverable by various sciences, including physics, neurophysiology and the psychology of perception. The phenomena I am dealing with will prove to be sufficiently challenging on their own, even on the assumption that some form of critical realism is correct.

The investigation of the phenomena in question begins at much the same point as do the philosophical disputes over realism, idealism and phenomenalism. In familiar Cartesian fashion we must begin with the perceptual experiences of percipients, as well as the emotions and other introspectible states that they report. Though some skeptics might question whether percipients actually had any experiences at all like those reported below, suggesting that everything was fabricated, I suspect that these would be a very small group. Much larger would be the group who would readily grant them their experiences but reject the probability, maybe even the possibility, of their preferred religious explanation. So, like the philosophical positions that seek to relate the supposed certainties of individual perceptions to claims about the reality and nature of a physical world, the phenomena in question here require relating an individual's reports of perceptions to various ontological claims. The difference is that the existence of a physical world is not usually taken as problematic, though complex issues surround perception, concept formation, representation of objects, and so on.

I wish to say something, finally, about the theoretical stance that I will adopt. Some discussions of apparitions and visions take for granted the existence of certain spiritual realities whose possible explanatory role can therefore be seriously considered. When Catholic theologian Karl Rahner discusses visions, apparitions, locutions, and so on,<sup>22</sup> he assumes the general position of the Christian church, according to which God and other spiritual beings, such as angels, exist. He can therefore go on to present the possibility that angels are the intermediaries between God and humans, responsible for producing the appropriate perceptual experiences in individuals who have visions. But many people living in this age of science, including Christians such as myself, see such a theory of angelic mediation as quite fantastic. For many of us the first touchstone of what is real is what critical common sense and the sciences attest. I take the posits of critical and experimental inquiry to be those with the greatest *prima facie* claim to our rational acceptance. This means that the onus of proof rests upon those who advance religious belief systems and the ontological posits implicit in them. However, I do not regard the existence of suprahuman intelligences or agencies to be beyond the domain of evidence, although I doubt that such evidence is straightforward and unequivocal.

I shall begin my study with the classical Christian view on apparitions and visions that began with Augustine and has been substantially incorporated into Catholic theology. I shall also present representative reports of Christic apparitions that have been advanced since NT times. This material in Chapter 1 will provide a backdrop for the contemporary visions and

apparitions. Chapter 2 will consist of descriptions of the apparitions people have told me they experienced, presented in a way that suggests a rough continuum, beginning with experiences that take place in trances and are dreamlike, and ending with those that are similar to normal perceptual experiences. A number of the experiences in Chapter 2 raise important questions about credibility, and I examine them in Chapter 3. I argue that this question is not nearly as easy to settle as defenders of subjectivist interpretations for visionary experiences often suppose. In Chapter 4, I turn my attention to the nature of the NT post-Resurrection appearance accounts. I survey critical positions advanced by selected authors that fall into three broad interpretive groups: traditional, reductionist, and fideist interpretations.

In Chapter 5, I scrutinize various explanatory proposals, either specifically for Christic apparitions or for apparition phenomena in general. This chapter considers explanations suggesting transcendent causes, or what is more commonly called "supernaturalism." I show how recent developments in understanding the structure of scientific theories are relevant to understanding explanations offered by religious belief systems. In Chapter 6, I consider the explanations, ever popular, that propose mental states or processes as the causes of visionary experiences. Chapter 7 is devoted to a consideration of explanations coming from neurophysiology. These are among the most important, culturally speaking, given the widespread suspicion among philosophers and neural scientists about the value of the conceptual resources of mentalism. How well the competing explanations handle the variety of visionary experiences described in Chapter 2 is critically examined. The final chapter, Chapter 8, outlines the conditions under which a theory of transcendence might be considered a tentative explanation for the Christic visionary experience, and offers suggestions for further research.

# 1 Christic Apparitions in Christian History

The fact that Christic visions and apparitions have been experienced since the earliest days of Christianity is so well accepted that documentation is hardly needed. As in other experiences that are a part of common knowledge, visionary experiences exhibit a variety and complexity that is little understood. I shall introduce the study of Christic visions and apparitions by describing some representative reports offered during the long history of the Christian church. The New Testament literature and apocryphal literature that circulated in the early churches also report encounters with the risen Jesus. Because of the special place of the NT writings in Christian thought, and the critical scrutiny to which they have been subjected, they will receive special attention in a later chapter.

No comprehensive collection of reported Christic visions and apparitions exists, but several sources for ancient and medieval experiences are available, including *A Dictionary of Miracles* by E. C. Brewer,<sup>1</sup> and *The Apparitions and Shrines of Heaven's Bright Queen* by W. J. Walsh.<sup>2</sup> Brewer's title indicates his interest in all of the different kinds of miraculous events documented in the history of the church, not just Christic visions, and the book has thousands of entries. Merely to scan the book's contents begins to give one a sense of how many kinds of unusual phenomena have been claimed. Brewer does offer editorial comment on occasion, but it is really only the most fabulous of accounts on which he casts doubt. Walsh's book too is not primarily concerned with Christic apparitions, but in the course of his discussion of Marian apparitions he



refers to several dozen Christic apparitions. He does not exhibit much of a critical attitude toward the material he presents or its sources, saying at one point, "we are not writing for skeptics, but for good Catholics."<sup>3</sup> *I Saw the Lord* by Chester and Lucille Huysen uncritically documents mostly non-Catholic material, including quite a number of twentieth-century experiences. Allegations of Christic visions have been numerous, and even include the claim that the personage who was worshiped in Mexico as Quetzalcoatl (and by other names in other parts of Latin America) derived from one or more Christic apparitions.<sup>4</sup>

## Representative Visions and Apparitions

Tradition has it that Jesus appeared to Mary, his mother, at the time of her death. All the disciples except Thomas were with Mary as they waited for her to die. When that time came the house was filled with mysterious sound and a delicious odor, and "Jesus Himself appeared, accompanied by a brilliant cortege of angels and saints, and the soul of Mary, leaving her mortal tenement, ascended with her son to Heaven." Three days later her body disappeared, giving rise to the belief that it too had been removed into heaven.<sup>5</sup> Another early appearance is ascribed to Martha, the sister of the Lazarus whom Jesus brought back to life.<sup>6</sup> Martha apparently was carried in a boat to Marseilles after being set adrift (without sails or oars) by those who persecuted her for her Christian faith. She introduced the Christian faith to that community, and later moved to Tarascon where she was visited by three bishops. St. Maximin from Aix, Trophimus from Arles, and Eutropius from Orange came to consecrate her house as a Christian church. Since she had no wine for her guests, "Jesus Christ Himself came and changed some water into wine, which the bishops greatly commended."<sup>7</sup> Brewer notes Mgr. Guerin, chamberlain of Pope Leo XIII, as the source of this, and then remarks: "A tale so full of anachronisms can scarcely be matched; but be it remembered that this biography is recorded in the nineteenth century as a history worthy of all men to be received and believed." Though Brewer seldom expresses incredulity about the stories he conveys, this one was evidently too much for him, in spite of its endorsement by a pope's chamberlain.

A number of experiences have been recorded in which people saw scenes of the trial or crucifixion of Jesus. St. Porphyry (A.D. 353-420), while in extreme pain, experienced a trance in which he saw Jesus upon the cross along with the penitent thief. Like the thief on the cross, Porphyry prayed, "Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom." Jesus then ordered the thief to leave his cross and go to Porphyry's

assistance. The thief raised Porphyry from the ground, brought him to Jesus, who then came down from his own cross to receive him. When Porphyry recovered consciousness, his pain was gone.<sup>8</sup> Here we encounter the puzzling phenomenon of events being re-created in the conscious awareness of percipients that are similar to things that occurred many years earlier. St. Rosa of Viterbo (1235-1252) saw Jesus suspended on his cross, nailed by his hands and feet, and crowned with thorns. His body bore many marks of torture and abuse, and at the sight of it Rosa fainted. When she recovered consciousness she is said to have gazed at him and conversed with him, he telling her of his love for the human race.<sup>9</sup> Other saints reported to have seen Jesus crucified include St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), St. Columba (1477-1501), St. Bridget of Sweden (c. 1312), and St. Ignatius Loyola (in 1537).

The account that Julian of Norwich has given of her Christic visionary experience (in about 1450) is famous for its detailed description of the sufferings of Jesus. The sixteen "shewings" or revelations took place over several days, as Julian was overcome with an illness that almost took her life. Last rites of the church were administered, and as she fixed her eyes on a crucifix, the shewings began. Julian describes the onset of the visions as follows: "Suddenly I saw the red blood running down from under the garland, hot and fresh, plenteous and life-like, just as it was in the time that the garland of thorns was pressed down on his blessed head."<sup>10</sup> Julian's account of her experiences has become a classic in visionary literature, both because of the nature of the accounts, and Julian's critical reflections. Critics are at odds about their character, and questions have been raised about Julian's own understanding of them, that is, whether they were only vividly imagined pictures or whether they involved the use of her eyes.<sup>11</sup> Equally famous are the Christic visions of Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), nun of the Carmelite order and prioress of the Discalced Carmelites. Teresa's experiences took place over a number of years, according to her account of them in *The Life of the Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus*. She also reports experiences in which diabolical agencies sought her undoing, as well as some apparitions of other heavenly visitors. Her visions culminate in an experience in which an angel took a golden spear with a fiery iron tip and pierced her heart so deeply that it penetrated her entrails. The experiences of Teresa have come under critical scrutiny in recent years, with quite a number of monographs published on her life and the character of her experiences.<sup>12</sup>

A number of accounts describe saints as giving gifts to the poor and finding to their surprise that Jesus was the recipient. One of the earliest such accounts is that of St. Gregory the Great (540-604), who regularly gave to beggars. One night after Gregory had fed the poor, Jesus appeared

to him and said, "Ordinarily you receive me in the poor that assemble at your board, but today you received Me personally."<sup>13</sup> Another appearance occurred to a man named Peter, a banker, who first realized the shortcomings of his life as a result of a dream in the year 619. This dream affected him so profoundly that he decided to give away much of his wealth, even to the point of giving his coat to a beggar. Peter was very annoyed when the beggar turned around and sold the coat to someone else, but on his way home that day Peter met Jesus wearing his coat. Jesus commended him for what he had done, and vanished. After this, Peter gave away all his possessions to the poor.<sup>14</sup> In A.D. 714 St. Hubert of Brittany is said to have given a feast to various people of rank and position. The feast was unexpectedly joined by a beggar, and after the beggar was fed, he vanished. The beggar is considered to have been Jesus.<sup>15</sup> A similar account is given concerning St. Julian, bishop of Cuenca, who contributed to the poor every day. One day a guest "clad in mean apparel, but not having a mean demeanour," joined Julian at table, and upon finishing his meal thanked Julian for his hospitality, and vanished.<sup>16</sup> Finally, St. Gregory the Great describes an incident of A.D. 494 in which Jesus is said to have appeared to a priest of Mount Preclaro about to sit down to dinner, instructing him to bring food to St. Benedict.<sup>17</sup>

In several stories Jesus appears angry, or disposed to bring judgment. Jesus appeared to St. Angela of Brescia in 1535, angry because she had neglected the work she was given to do. His manner was menacing, and he bore a whip in his hand. When he granted the pardon she requested, Angela expressed her gratitude by setting up the Ursuline order.<sup>18</sup> St. Dominic saw Jesus angry for the sins of the world and wanting to destroy it. But the Virgin Mary presented St. Dominic and St. Francis to Jesus in order to appease him, predicting that they would effect a great reformation, whereupon Jesus relented.<sup>19</sup> St. Jerome describes having been beaten for his love of Cicero and his neglect of the Scriptures. He was taken to the judgment seat of God and scourged on the orders of Jesus. He remarks: "Let none think this a vision or a dream!! The angels know it was no dream. Christ Himself is my witness it was no dream; yea, my whole body still bears the marks of that terrible flagellation."<sup>20</sup>

This story is interesting because it describes alleged effects that might be seen by any observer, even if the visionary experience involved scenes that were not. Jerome is clearly appealing to the observable effects of flagellation to defend the objectivity of the visionary experience.

Another interesting account is that of Ernest Clifton, a fifteenth-century English monk who left the monastic life to satisfy his immoral desires. One form of depravity led to another, and he finally settled on operating an inn, stealing from and murdering the travelers who lodged

with him. One night he entered a room to murder its occupant, but instead of his intended victim, he found himself looking at Jesus full of the wounds of crucifixion. Jesus looked at him in pity and asked: "Do you wish to kill me again? Stretch forth your hand and murder me again." Ernest was so moved by this experience that he confessed all his doings to the authorities, who sentenced him to hang. He somehow managed to avoid being executed, was freed, and returned to monastic life.<sup>21</sup>

Jesus is also said to have been seen at the right hand of God, or as a king reigning in splendor. St. Wulsin, bishop of Sherbourne in Dorsetshire in the tenth century, is said to have seen Jesus at the right hand of God.<sup>22</sup> St. Clara is said to have seen Jesus in 1346, seated on his throne of glory, surrounded by John the Baptist and the apostles. He showed Clara his wound in his side.<sup>23</sup> St. Catherine of Siena, at the age of 6, saw Jesus in pontifical robes above the church of St. Dominic, his face beaming with kindness.<sup>24</sup> St. Alphonsus Rodriquez of Valencia saw Jesus resplendent in glory, along with various saints, including St. Francis.<sup>25</sup> John Massias of Lima, Peru, saw Jesus, Mary, and other saints at the time of his death in 1645.<sup>26</sup> St. Angela of Foligno saw Jesus at her death in 1309. He is said to have shown her the royal robe of light with which a soul is clothed at death.<sup>27</sup> St. Nicholas of Tolentine also saw Jesus at the time of his death in 1310. Jesus appeared to him along with his mother Mary and St. Augustine.<sup>28</sup>

A number of people report having been healed by Jesus when he appeared to them. St. Barbara of Nicomedia was reportedly healed by Jesus when he appeared to her in prison after her father had beaten and imprisoned her for her faith.<sup>29</sup> St. Vincent Ferrier informed Pope Benedict XIII in 1411 that he had been healed when Jesus appeared to him in 1396 and touched his face with his right hand.<sup>30</sup> I shall indicate in the next chapter that this phenomenon continues to be reported.

Christic apparitions have been reported in many other circumstances. St. Gregory the Great, pope of the Roman church, tells of his Aunt Tarsilla's seeing Jesus at the time of her death. As she died, "a refreshing fragrance filled the room, indicating to all the presence of Him as the source of all that is fragrant and refreshing."<sup>31</sup> Forty Christian soldiers imprisoned and awaiting execution for refusing to offer sacrifices to pagan deities are said to have been visited in prison by Jesus in A.D. 320.<sup>32</sup> St. Honore (sixth century) says Jesus came to him and administered the holy elements to him with his own hands.<sup>33</sup> St. Lutgardes is said to have had no true religious feeling until Jesus appeared to her in person in 1246.<sup>34</sup>

Margaret Mary Alacoque of Burgundy (1648-1690), who initiated the devotion to the sacred heart of Jesus<sup>35</sup> and is reported to have had many apparition experiences, had a crown placed on her head by Jesus as

he met her going to communion.<sup>36</sup> Emperor St. Henry saw Jesus enter St. Mary Major's church in Rome in 1014 to celebrate mass, accompanied by many saints and angels. One of the angels came up to Henry and touched his thigh, whereupon he became lame and remained so for the rest of his life.<sup>37</sup> St. Hyacinth of Kiev, while saying a mass in 1257, is reported to have seen Jesus crown the Virgin Mary with a crown of flowers and stars, which she promptly gave to Hyacinth.<sup>38</sup> St. Mechtilde of Heldelfs in Germany also saw Jesus with many angels during a mass around 1293, and her sister St. Gertrude saw Jesus around 1334.<sup>39</sup>

Stephana Quinzani of Brescia, Italy, received a marvelous ring from Jesus when he appeared to her and espoused her to himself. This ring is said to have been seen by many people.<sup>40</sup> Robert of Lyons was shown the heavenly city in a vision in 1109, after asking God to show him the path to heaven. He found himself separated from the city by a river, and on the opposite bank were about a dozen poor men washing their clothes. Among them was one in a robe of dazzling whiteness, helping the others. This dazzling figure said to Robert, "I am Jesus Christ, ever ready to help the truly penitent."<sup>41</sup> In 1221 St. Francis of Assisi saw Jesus, Mary his mother, and a multitude of angels, and two years later he saw Jesus again. This time St. Francis was given three white and three red roses of exquisite beauty "as an external ratification of the reality of his vision, it being in the midst of winter, when a rose was nowhere to be found."<sup>42</sup> St. Veronica of Milan is said to have been shown the whole life of Jesus in a series of visions in the fifteenth century.<sup>43</sup>

Various people report seeing Jesus as an infant or a little child, among them Pope Alexander I in A.D. 118, and St. Antony of Padua.<sup>44</sup> Several people are said to have had the infant Jesus placed in their arms, including St. John of the Cross<sup>45</sup> and St. Philomena, the daughter of the governor of Macedonia killed by the Roman emperor Diocletian in 320.<sup>46</sup> Hermann Joseph of Cologne, as a very devout child, is said to have played with the infant Jesus in 1160.<sup>47</sup> St. Rose of Lima, Peru, saw Jesus as a child many times. She also experienced mystic espousal.<sup>48</sup> Osanna of Mantua, Italy, saw Jesus as a lovely child with a crown of thorns on his head and carrying a cross.<sup>49</sup> Benoite Rencural of Laus, France, had numerous apparitions of Mary and the child Jesus, and also saw Jesus in adult form.<sup>50</sup> Anne Catherine Emmerich of Flamske, Germany, saw Jesus offer her a crown of thorns or a crown of flowers. She chose the former in order to identify with him in suffering, and experienced great pain until her death.<sup>51</sup>

Among more recent reports of Christic visions are those experienced by visionaries of the Eastern Orthodox Church as described by Brenda Meehan. She writes of Abbess Taisiia (1840-1915), who, at the time of