Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology

Kwok Pui-lan

WJK
WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE · KENTUCKY

7

Engendering Christ

Who Do You Say that I Am?

> The Black Christ of Black Theology was obscene because it uncovered racism under the guise of a white Jesus. . . . The *Christa* is another example of obscenity. It undresses the masculinity of God.
> *Marcella Althaus-Reid*[1]

Is the gender of Christ important? For some time it has been said that colonialist Christianity preached the Christ as the Lord and Conqueror to the peoples of the world. Then came the white feminists who said that the central problems of Christianity were that the savior was male and that the foundational Christian symbol was androcentric.[2] The debate on the maleness of Christ has become so intense that some feminists have left the church and declared themselves post-Christians.[3]

For me, the central question is, How is it possible for the formerly colonized, oppressed, subjugated subaltern to transform the symbol of Christ—a symbol that has been used to justify colonization and domination—into a symbol that affirms life, dignity, and freedom? Can the subaltern speak about Christ, and if so, under what conditions? What language shall we borrow? Do we need to borrow from malestream theologies or feminist theories? What are the dangers of doing so? Alternatively, if we need to ground our reflections in the culture and religiosity of our people, how can we avoid the pitfalls of cultural essentialism, nativism, and nationalistic ideologies? What makes it possible to say something new about Jesus/Christ?

1. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2001), 111.

2. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

3. Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), and idem, *After Christianity* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1996).

POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST RETHINKING OF JESUS/CHRIST

A postcolonial interpretation of Christ needs to push the boundaries, and asks the following critical questions: How does belief in the uniqueness of Christ justify the superiority of Christianity and condone colonization as the "civilizing mission of the West," often seen as the "white man's burden"? Why did the image of Jesus sent by the missionaries look more like a white man with a straight nose and blue eyes than a Jewish man? How does the Aryan Christ contribute both to the colonization of the Other living outside Europe and also to the oppression of the Other living inside Europe—the Jews? When feminist theologians such as Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether criticize the androcentric symbols of Christianity such as the maleness of Christ, why is it that only the gender of Jesus matters? What does Ruether's famous question, "Can a male savior save women?"[4] both reveal and suppress? In the liberation theological movements that emerged in the 1960s, why was the maleness of Christ revitalized to signify a masculinist liberator, without concomitant concerns about how such images might have marginalized women? What is at stake when the colonizers, the dominant theologians, and the Vatican all take for granted that the Christ figure must be masculine? How has the masculinity of Jesus been constructed? Even if Jesus' masculinity is presupposed, why has Jesus' sexuality been regarded as taboo?

As these explosive questions indicate, a postcolonial female theologian cannot simply accept the dominant positions about Christology in mainline Christianity, and neither can she subscribe to white feminist or liberationist formulations without some serious rethinking. I believe the task of a critical theologian is not so much to provide answers, but to raise new questions that have not been asked before or to point to new avenues of thought that may have been overlooked or suppressed. Indeed, the question of the gender of Christ has been so much a part of our common sense that "engendering Christ" has seldom been the substance of serious theological debate. Ruether's question "Can a male savior save women?" implicitly consents to the fact that the savior is male, and the question then becomes what has a male savior to do

4. See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 45–56; and idem, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 116–38.

with women. If we problematize the gender of the savior, what kind of questions will we ask?

To ask about the gender of Christ is to press on the discursive limits of sex, gender, and sexuality in Christianity. Such issues are at the heart of Christian symbolics. Since they are so powerful, they are often treated as taboo in Christian circles. In this chapter, I should like to experiment with thinking at the limits of conventional theology and listen to some of the emergent voices that are shaping the christological debate at the beginning of the new millennium. Sometimes we need to get out of our comfort zone in order to encounter God anew and to listen to the gentle voice of God coming from the whirlwind. It is often at the margin of our consciousness that something new can be discerned that jolts us from our familiar habit of thinking. As postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha has noticed, it is at the epistemological "limits" of some of the dominant and ethnocentric ideas that a range of other dissonant, and even dissident, histories and voices—of women, the colonized, and racial and sexual minority groups—can be heard.[5]

One of the most significant developments of liberation theology is that marginalized communities have begun to use their own cultural idioms and religious imaginations to articulate their own understanding of salvation and the role of Jesus Christ in the salvific process. Instead of a monolithic understanding of Christ as the liberator, a plurality of images of Jesus has been offered, including the Black Christ, Jesus the Crucified Guru, Jesus the Corn Mother, Jesus the Priest of Han, Jesus the Feminine Shakti, Jesus the Sophia-God. Some of these images highlight the socioeconomic aspects of salvation, while others have more to do with the cultural-religious dimensions.

How can we, as theologians, begin to understand and theorize this seeming "sea of heteroglossia," as Mikhail Bakhtin would say, when people begin to use their own tongues and cultural idioms to speak about Christ? At the beginning of the twentieth century, Albert Schweitzer's book, which summarizes nineteenth-century scholarship on Jesus, was translated and published in English as *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. I would suggest that an apt title for a book that summarizes theological reflections on Jesus in the twentieth century would be *The Quest of the Hybridized Jesus*. I think the concept of hybridity, as it has been vigorously debated among postcolonial theorists, offers some important hints to interpret the emergence of these images. First, hybridity is not simply the mixing of two languages or the juxtaposition of two cultures, as our liberal or "pluralistic" understanding presents it, as if the two were on equal footing. Rather, hybridity in postcolonial discourse deals specifically with the colonial authority and power of representation. As Homi Bhabha puts

5. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 4–5.

it: "Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition."[6] Second, Stuart Hall and others have insisted that colonization is a double inscription process, affecting the metropolis as much as the colonies. Thus, hybridity exposes the myths of cultural purity, the monologic discourse, unitary enunciation, and the collapse of difference that legitimize colonial authority. Third, hybridity destabilizes the frame of reference/frame of mind that sees things as binary opposites: black and white, here and there, East and West, European and the native. It critiques rigid boundaries, challenges the construction of the center and the periphery, and speaks of "interstitial integrity."[7] The subtle, nuanced differences in-between, the multidimensional temporalities, the pluriphonic voices of women and men, and the "fruitful ambiguity" offer new possibilities and open new space for creative theological imagination of Christ.

JESUS/CHRIST AS HYBRID CONCEPT

The most hybridized concept in the Christian tradition is that of Jesus/Christ. The space between Jesus and Christ is unsettling and fluid, resisting easy categorization and closure. It is the "contact zone" or "borderland" between the human and the divine, the one and the many, the historical and the cosmological, the Jewish and the Hellenistic, the prophetic and the sacramental, the God of the conquerors and the God of the meek and the lowly. Jesus' question "Who do you say that I am?" is an invitation for every Christian and local faith community to infuse that contact zone with new meanings, insights, and possibilities. The richness and vibrancy of the Christian community is diminished whenever the space between Jesus and Christ is fixed, whether, on the one hand, as a result of the need for doctrinal purity, the suppression of syncretism, or the fear of contamination of native cultures, or, on the other hand, on account of historical positivism and its claims of objectivity and scientific truths about Jesus.

The images of Jesus/Christ presented in the New Testament are highly pluralistic and hybridized, emerging out of the intermingling of the cultures of Palestine, the Hellenistic Jewish diaspora, and the wider Hellenistic world. As George Soares Prabhu, a biblical scholar from India, has noted:

6. Ibid., 114.

7. Rita Nakashima Brock, "Interstitial Integrity: Reflections toward an Asian American Woman's Theology," in *Introduction to Christian Theology: Contemporary North American Perspectives*, ed. Roger A. Badham (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 183–96.

> New Testament christology is inclusive and pluriform. Every community evolves its own understanding of Jesus responding to its own cry for life. And because life changes christologies change too. The New Testament preserves all these christologies, without opting exclusively for any one among them, because it does not wish to offer us (as dogmatic theology pretends to do) a finished product, to be accepted unquestionably by all. Rather its pluralism indicates a christological open-endedness, inviting us to discover our own particular christology, that is, specific significance of Jesus for our situation in the Third World today.[8]

However, such open-ended and fluid understanding of Christology became a threat to the expanding Roman Empire, when imperial unity required some kind of doctrinal uniformity. Under political pressure and amidst ecclesiastical rivalry, the early Christian councils sought to differentiate orthodoxy from heterodoxy. But it is important to remember that the christological formulas crafted in Nicaea, Ephesus, or Chalcedon were never accepted as normative by all Christians. These credal and "orthodox" formulas never succeeded in silencing the debates or shutting out the voices of dissent. At a later stage, when missionaries promoted the interests of European empires and the United States through their so-called civilizing mission, their prepackaged and encapsulated Christ was also resisted and challenged. Bhabha relates an interesting story about how the Indians on the subcontinent could not understand the meaning of eating Jesus' body and drinking his blood, because most of them were vegetarians.

One of the most important insights I have learned from postcolonial critics is that colonization is a double and mutually inscribing process. Much has been said about cultural hybridization in the colonies as a result of the forced imposition of European and American cultures onto others. Less attention has been paid to the equally profound hybridization going on in the metropolitan centers. In doing research on the relationship between Christology and the colonial imagination, I am fascinated by the fact that the quest for the historical Jesus always takes place in the metropolis. The quest for Jesus is a quest for cultural origin, national identity, and racial genealogy. The first quest could not have taken place without the new knowledge brought to Europe about the myths, cultures, and wisdom traditions of the colonized peoples. Its epistemological framework was constructed out of a combination of Orientalist philology, racist ideology, and Eurocentric study of other peoples' mythology and traditions.

8. George Soares Prabhu, "The Jesus of Faith: A Christological Contribution to an Ecumenical Third World Spirituality," in *Spirituality of the Third World*, ed. K. C. Abraham and Bernadette Mbuy-Beya (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 146.

I have argued that the search for Jesus must be read against the search for "natives" who could be conquered.[9] The encounter with the natives created anxiety and necessitated the quest for European self-identity. David Friedrich Strauss's portrayal of Jesus as a hero, Ernest Renan's picture of him within French bourgeois culture, and the Anglo-Saxon Christ of social Darwinism are examples of cultural hybridization, attempts to interpret the Christ symbol through the lenses of the culture of imperialism.[10] Yet, the ambivalence about one's origin and culture must be concealed, split off, or displaced. These images of Jesus were thus offered as the results of the quest for scientific and objective truths, on which the origin of Christianity could be established and the foundation of European civilization maintained.

The first quest for the historical Jesus, however, took place not only in the search for the native to colonize but also in the suppression of the Other within—namely, the Jews. Jonathan Boyarin's work *Storm from Paradise* has helped me understand this point and to make the connection among colonialism, anti-Judaism, and feminism.[11] Susannah Heschel's important research on the study of New Testament scholarship in nineteenth-century Germany has shown how the Jewishness of Jesus was downplayed by a variety of scholars, who portrayed him as a rebel against Judaism, calling himself the Son of Man to avoid being associated with the Jews. Some even suggested that Jesus might not be Jewish in origin, while others actually tried to prove that Jesus was in fact an Aryan because he had come from Galilee rather than Judea. This Aryan Christianity wanted to distinguish itself from its Jewish roots and to justify the superiority of the Aryan race, following the racial theory current at the time.[12]

While the first quest took place in Europe, the newest quest has gathered momentum in the United States, as the United States is trying to create a Pax Americana. Because of the history of immigration, the natives are no longer outside but are already *inside* the metropolitan centers, and the dominant white culture does not know how to deal with the challenges of diversity

9. Kwok Pui-lan, "Jesus/The Native: Biblical Studies from a Postcolonial Perspective," in *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 75–80.

10. For the Anglo-Saxon Christ, see Alan Davies, *Infected Christianity: A Study of Modern Racism* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), 73–88.

11. Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 77–115.

12. Susannah Heschel, "The Image of Judaism in Nineteenth-Century Christian New Testament Scholarship in Germany," in *Jewish-Christian Encounter over the Centuries: Symbiosis, Prejudice, Holocaust, Dialogue*, ed. Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 215–40.

and multiculturalism. The images of Jesus as the sage, the healer, the Spirit-filled person, promoted in the popular quest books, look much like the modern-day gurus in the age of self-help and New Age movements. Billed as the first interdisciplinary quest and the most scientific search for Jesus, this current quest may also be a displaced and repressed quest for white male identity when the melting pot does not melt anymore. Stephen Moore has described this current quest for Jesus in a sarcastic way:

> Many of us have joined that manhunt for the Jew of Nazareth, many more of us cheering or yelling obscenities from the sidelines. Startled eyes turn as the hysterical Jesus suspects are dragged into the church by the triumphant band of scholars. To the dubious congregation in the pews, each Jesus seems more unlikely than the last. "Did you at any time claim to be the Christ, the Son of the living God?" each is asked in turn. "I did not," most of them reply.[13]

MARGINALIZED IMAGES OF JESUS/CHRIST

Theologians from marginalized communities have offered different images and understandings of Jesus/Christ, subverting the theological hegemony of Europe and white America and expressing little interest themselves in joining this manhunt for Jesus. I would like to discuss five such images that are relevant to the topic "engendering Christ": the Black Christ in the works of black and womanist theologians; Jesus as Corn Mother; Jesus as the Feminine Shakti in India; Jesus as the theological transvestite; and Jesus as the Bi/Christ. Afterward, I will present a number of critical observations and reflections.

The Black Christ

The Black Christ became a concrete symbol of the civil rights and black power movements of the 1960s with the advent of the black consciousness era. In response to Malcolm X's challenges to Christianity, as an oppressive tradition in which black people worship a white Christ, black theologians formulated the hybridized concept of a Black Christ. The space between black and Christ is hotly contested and debated among male black theologians, later joined by their womanist colleagues.

13. Stephen D. Moore, "Ugly Thought: On the Face and Physique of the Historical Jesus," in *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 378.

Albert Cleage, for example, advocated a literal blackness, arguing that Jesus of Nazareth was ethnically black.[14] He based his argument on Jesus' lineage from Mary, who was from the tribe of Judah, which consisted of nonwhite people. Genealogically speaking, he claimed, Jesus was of African ancestry, just as black people could trace their ancestry to Africa. In this sense, Cleage argued that the black people were not worshipping a white Christ, as he tried to rescue Jesus from a white racist society. Writing in the 1960s, Cleage hoped that the figure of the Black Messiah could bring closer together the expectations of the black nationalist movement and Christianity, a tradition embraced by the majority of the black people.

Contrary to Cleage, James Cone opted for a symbolic blackness, for as he so eloquently puts it, "Christ is black, therefore, not because of some cultural or psychological need of black people, but because and only because Christ *really* enters into our world where the poor, the despised, and the black are, disclosing that he is with them."[15] For Cone, the claim that Jesus is black is not meant to exclude white people, but to enable black people to identify the presence of Jesus in their lives. Moreover, this assertion is rooted in Cone's understanding of the life and work of Jesus, who claimed to be the Christ, the one who revealed that God is for us. One basic characteristic of Jesus' life and ministry was his identification with the oppressed and downtrodden of his time. To transfer this to the contemporary situation, Jesus would have to be black if he were to identify with the oppressed in the white racist American society.

More recently, Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher presents an even more hybridized version, with Jesus as an Afro-Asiatic Jew, and implores the black churches to affirm both Jesus' blackness and his Jewishness. He surmises that the Hebrew people, the Semites, were not a "race," but a "mixed crowd" of various peoples, including Africans. He writes: "Jews, like many peoples who arose on the land bridge between Africa and Asia, were Afro-Asiatic people."[16] To reclaim the Afro-Asiastic heritage of Jesus' Jewishness is important for the black churches, given the centuries of the Europeanization of Jesus and Jews and the ubiquitous images of the white Jesus superimposed by white hegemony.

These black theologians are challenged by their female counterparts, who claim that a one-dimensional focus on Jesus' racial and ethnic background is not sufficient as long as the maleness of Christ is left unexamined. The image

14. Albert Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 42. See also the discussion of Cleage and James Cone in Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 55–60.

15. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 136.

16. Karen Baker-Fletcher and Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 98.

of the Black Christ contests the power behind the symbol of the blue-eyed, pale-skinned Christ in order to restore the dignity and manhood of black men. The subjugated and enslaved black man wants to confront the white man's power, while preserving his male privilege intact. To understand Christ in the life and struggle of black women, womanist theologians insist that we must move beyond limiting the experience of Christ to the historical Jesus, and risk seeing salvific acts in other persons and events. Jacquelyn Grant has no problem seeing Jesus in black women, for she disavows the centrality of the maleness of Christ and wants to discern the meaning of Jesus' suffering and salvation through the witness and ministry of black women.[17] Kelly Brown Douglas also states: "Christ can be seen in the face of a Sojourner Truth, a Harriet Tubman, or a Fannie Lou Hamer,"[18] as well as in male figures who help the entire black community to struggle for wholeness. In order to see Christ in the face of black women, Brown Douglas insists that womanist theologians must be involved in and connected with the lives of the black women in the churches and community organizations and movements.

Not all womanist theologians endorse the images of womanist Black Christ, however, for some find that still too limiting. Trying to move beyond both androcentric and anthropocentric assumptions about the Black Christ, Karen Baker-Fletcher proposes a creation-centered Christology that focuses neither on color nor on race. For her, "Jesus is fully spirit and fully dust."[19] In her womanist ecotheological project, Jesus the incarnate, embodied in dust, reminds us of God's intimate relation to creation. Consequently, she interprets the salvific work of Christ through the lens of creation: "God, embodied in Jesus, joined with the dust of the earth, reconciling the broken relationship with God and creation that we humans have involved ourselves in. Jesus realized harmony of creation and Spirit in the actions associated with his life and work."[20]

The Corn Mother

In a way similar to the black and womanist theologians, George Tinker criticizes the oppression of white Christianity, its missionary conquest, and its formulation of Jesus as Conqueror. He charges, "American Indian peoples were being co-opted into a cultural frame of reference that necessitated self-denial

17. Jacquelyn Grant, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Experience as a Source for Doing Theology, with Special Reference to Christology," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1986), 195–212.

18. Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 108.

19. Baker-Fletcher and Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister, My Brother*, 87.

20. Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 19.

and assimilation to the language and social structures of the conqueror."[21] Instead of focusing on skin color, Tinker looks for symbolic and mythological structures in Indian culture to infuse new meanings into the understanding of Christ. In this regard he finds the preexistent Logos in the first chapter of the Gospel of John helpful to bridge this mental and imaginative gap. Jesus is seen as one, albeit very powerful, occurrence of the Logos in human history. Consequently, American Indian people can add to Christianity's knowledge of salvation from their own experiences of healing throughout their history. Furthermore, Tinker argues that the Logos should not be construed as male, that the American Indian understanding of bi-gender duality entertains the possibility that Christ could be female. For him, therefore, the mythic image of the Corn Mother, whose suffering and self-sacrifice offer food and sustenance for her children, prevalent in many American Indian cultures, becomes a compelling image for Christ. This image, he further argues, overcomes anthropocentrism, for in dying she becomes identified with the earth. Reading John's Gospel through Native eyes, Tinker powerfully asks: "Why should Indian people be coerced to give up God's unique self-disclosure to us? Why ought Indian people learn to identify after the fact with God's self-disclosure to some other people in a different place and time in a mythic tradition that is culturally strange and alienating?"[22]

Tinker attaches importance to the vicarious suffering of the Corn Mother on behalf of the whole people.[23] Native people have lived with the memory of the real physical sacrifice for the people as well as with the ceremonial sacrifice and suffering in Native rites such as the vision quest, the sun dance, and the purification rite sometimes called "sweat lodge." The vicarious suffering of the death of the Corn Mother provides food and sustenance for the people. Food is thus sacred and to be shared, because eating is always eating the body of the Corn Mother or First Mother. The sharing of food also reminds us of the close connection with other relatives, such as the Buffalo, the Deer, and the Fish, because they also depend on the bounty provided by the Mother. In such a way, the Corn Mother, our ancestors, and our relatives live among us not only in spirit, but are also physically present in us because we eat the produce of the earth where they have returned in one way or the other. The stories of the Corn Mother also send a stark warning against male violence,

21. George Tinker, "Jesus, Corn Mother, and Conquest: Christology and Colonialism," in *Native American Religious Identity: Unforgotten Gods*, ed. Jace Weaver (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 139. This article appears in a revised form in Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George E. "Tink" Tinker, *A Native American Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), 62–84.

22. Tinker, "Jesus, Corn Mother, and Conquest," 152.

23. Ibid., 151–52.

because it was the male siblings who killed her. The recovery of the theological and ethical meanings of the oral texts of the Corn Mother and reading it in parallel with the first chapter of John's Gospel make it possible for the Native community "to understand the notion of Christ with much greater inclusivity and parity of power between colonizer and colonized."[24]

The theological formulation of Jesus as the Corn Mother takes into consideration two facts: that many Native Americans are converted to Christianity and find Christian symbols important in their religious life, and that a growing number of Native Americans want to reclaim and be reconnected with Native traditions and rites. However, such transposition may have the danger of obfuscating indigenous symbolic systems and spiritual traditions, which have been subjected to centuries of cultural theft and genocide. Native peoples who are not Christians may become suspicious that the Native symbols are again taken from the indigenous community, and that on them Christian categories are being superimposed. Such danger is aptly captured in the title of the book *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away*.[25] The pros and cons of using the Corn Mother or other Native idioms to interpret Christ will need to be continually discussed.

The Feminine Shakti

While Tinker has recovered the mythic structure of Native people in the Americas, Asian feminist theologians articulate their understanding of Christ through a dialogue between Christian faith and Asian indigenous traditions and social contexts. Chung Hyun Kyung, for example, argues that theologians should shift their focus from institutional religious traditions to people's religiosity, such as shamanism.[26] She points out that institutional dogmatic traditions are usually male-centered and authoritarian, while people's religiosity may contain liberating elements that are expressions of their faith and daily struggles. She suggests that we listen to the people, instead of turning to Scripture and dogma as our primary source and data.

A concrete example of christological reformulation comes from India, where feminist theologians are reclaiming their cultural roots to understand the life and work of Christ. They have attached great importance to the Hindu concept of Shakti, the feminine principle that is the life energy of the universe.

24. Ibid., 153.

25. Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991).

26. Chung Hyun Kyung, "Asian Christologies and People's Religions," *Voices from the Third World* 19, no. 1 (1996): 214–27.

According to Aruna Gnanadason, Shakti is the source and substance of all things, pervading everything, and the creative principle of the universe.[27] The recovery of the feminine principle of Shakti has been crucial in ecological awareness in India, as evident in the writings of the noted scientist and ecologist Vandana Shiva.[28] For theologian Stella Baltazar, the transcended Christ can be imagined as the embodiment of the feminine principle, the Shakti, the energizer and vitalizer.[29] For her, it is a serious limitation to express the resurrected Christ in purely male or patriarchal terms. Using the Hindu concept of Shakti, the liberative potential of the cosmic Christ can then be expressed through the Indian cosmology of wholeness and interconnectedness.

But the use of the concept of Shakti is not without problems, given the current political situation of India, when "Hinduism" has been reconstructed to represent the national tradition of India in order to consolidate the power of the Hindu nationalist party and to suppress those who belong to other traditions. Aruna Gnanadason and other theologians are aware that the indigenization of Christianity into the cultural milieu of the Hindu tradition must not be seen as supporting a Hindu hegemony. The grafting of Christology onto the Hindu concept of Shakti needs to consider not only the philosophical and religious dimensions but also the contemporary political implications. Contrary to the case of the Native Americans, in which the appropriation of the Corn Mother might lead to the obfuscation of indigenous symbolic system, the use of Shakti in this case may be seen as supporting an elitist and overdominating tradition.

The Theological Transvestite

My fourth example comes not from Christians who want to claim christological language on their terms, but from a Jewish theologian who wants to "destabilize Christian theology and create a space for Jewish self-definition."[30] Susannah Heschel notes that the figure of Jesus stands at the boundary of Judaism and Christianity, so that the debate on the Jewishness of Jesus calls

27. Aruna Gnanadason, "Toward a Feminist Eco-Theology for India," in *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 75.

28. Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (London: Zed Books, 1989).

29. Stella Baltazar, "Domestic Violence in Indian Perspective," in *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, ed. Mary John Mananzan et al. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 64.

30. Susannah Heschel, "Jesus as a Theological Transvestite," in *Judaism since Gender*, ed. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt (New York: Routledge, 1997), 188–97.

into question the self-understanding of both traditions. Building on the insights of queer theory, she proposes to see Jesus as a theological transvestite. Heschel is not the only one to describe Jesus as a transvestite, for Eleanor McLaughlin has used the term to question gender essentialism and to imagine Jesus as a cross-dresser who challenged rigid boundaries of gender and tradition.[31] But for Heschel, the figure of Jesus destabilizes and questions the construction of boundary between Judaism and Christianity, as the performative activity of a transvestite disrupts the easy categorization and identifiable essence of gender. She notes that there have been various attempts on the Jewish side to emphasize the Jewishness of Jesus and to deny that Jesus initiated a new religious movement. On the other hand, the historical quest for Jesus on the Protestant side tends to present an ahistorical Jesus by focusing on his uniqueness and his superior religious consciousness. Liberal theologians downplay Jewish influences on Jesus' teachings, to safeguard the purity of Jesus as the ultimate cultural phallus for Western civilization. Heschel states: "As Jew and the first Christian, yet neither a Jew nor a Christian, Jesus is the ultimate theological transvestite" that unsettles and queers the boundaries between Judaism and Christianity.[32]

It is interesting that Heschel does not spell out whether Jesus was a man who cross-dressed as a female or a woman who cross-dressed as a male. While she questions gender binarism in our thought patterns, her focus is not on the gender difference as it may apply to the Christ figure. Her work is based on the classic study of transvestites by Marjorie Garber, who suggests that the figure of the transvestite questions binary thinking and introduces the "third"—a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility.[33] Garber notes that the transvestite figure that does not seem "to be primarily concerned with gender difference or blurred gender indicates a *category crisis elsewhere*, an irresolvable conflict or epistemological crux that destabilizes binarity, and displaces the resulting discomfort onto a figure that already inhabits, indeed incarnates, the margin."[34] Unlike Eleanor McLaughlin, who uses Jesus as the transvestite to question gender binarism in support of women's ordination, Heschel uses the transvestite figure to call into question a *category crisis elsewhere*, namely, the problematic and unsettling boundary between Judaism and Christianity.

31. Eleanor McLaughlin, "Feminist Christologies: Re-Dressing the Tradition," in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 138–42.
32. Heschel, "Jesus as a Theological Transvestite," 194.
33. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 11.
34. Ibid., 17.

Jesus as Bi/Christ

My last example comes from *Indecent Theology*, by Marcella Althaus-Reid, who grew up among the poor in Argentina and is teaching in Scotland. With the argument that all theology is sexual, Althaus-Reid challenges theologians to come out from their sexual and theological closets. *Indecent Theology* argues that feminist theology has so far concentrated on gender and has rarely talked about sex and sexuality. While feminist and liberation theologies have emphasized the use of experience in theology, sexual stories have seldom been seen as data that could provide theological insights. Except in gay and lesbian theology, sexual theology has remained underdeveloped and marginalized, and has in fact been left in the closet of mainstream theology. Althaus-Reid counters that sexuality is not a middle-class concern, as it is often assumed to be, because the sex/gender system is integrally linked to the economic and political structures. She argues that sexual ideology pervades economic and political theories and undergirds the epistemological foundations of theology, including liberation theology. A social analysis that understands poverty in economic terms and ignores the sexual and genderized dimensions is not only incomplete, but mystifies the complex web of human relations that both constitute and sustain the social conditions that keep the people poor.

She contends that although liberation theology has shifted the theological subject to "the poor," it continues to share the masculinist and heterosexual assumptions of the dominant theology. As a result, most liberation theologians—male and female—support the sexual codification of both church and society. Likewise, Jesus is imagined to be a sexually safe celibate, and Mary assumes the role of the mother of the poor. The images of Christ and Mary that liberation theologians portray are decent and safe and will not disrupt conventional sexual norms. Jesus can be seen as a social radical, but only as an asexual or celibate figure. Althaus-Reid writes: "He has been dressed theologically as a heterosexually orientated (celibate) man. Jesus with erased genitalia; Jesus minus erotic body."[35] She offers a number of images for Christ in her book, one of which is that of a Bi/Christ. This Bi/Christ, for her, is not related to the sexual performances of Jesus, but to two important points: people's sexual identity outside heterosexualism and "a pattern of thought for a larger Christ outside binary boundaries."[36] The concept of Bi/Christ is intended to disrupt the mono-relationship, challenge dualistic submission, and subvert the "normative vision" of heterosexual difference. Instead of a Mono/Christ, the Bi/Christ has the potential to challenge religious groups, including the Basic

35. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 114.
36. Ibid., 117.

Christian Communities, to organize themselves based not on homophobic theology and compulsory heterosexist relationships, and to bring about social transformation based on more egalitarian principles.

Commenting on Althaus-Reid's image of the Bi/Christ, Robert Goss affirms its possibility to "destabilize the sex/gender system embedded in heteronormative christologies and used to legitimize oppressive heterosexual networks of power."[37] For Goss, while the Bi/Christ is fluid enough to include a variety of sexual configurations, it is not broad enough to include various gender constructions, including the gender conformists and gender transgressors. Using the gender performativity theory of Judith Butler, and building on the work of Eleanor McLaughlin, Goss proposes to accessorize the Bi/Christ with the modification of the Bi/Transvestite Christ. He argues that the queer postmodern representational strategies undergirding the Bi/Transvestite Christ will allow one to "reclaim the sexuality of Jesus/Christ and play with gender constructions intersected with diverse sexual attractions."[38]

CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

I would like to draw some observations from these various attempts at de/reconstructing the symbol of Christ.

First, the notion of Jesus/Christ has been a very hybridized concept from the beginning, and as Christianity encounters diverse cultures the formulations of Christology continue to hybridize. There is no original or privileged understanding of Christ, whether at the beginning of the Christian movement or in the history of the church, that can be claimed as pure and foundational, not subject to the limitations of culture and history. It is a futile exercise to search for the "real" or historical Jesus in order to reconstruct a pristine Christian origin. The concept of hybridization may have advantages over the earlier notions of contextualization and indigenization, for the latter terms sometimes assume that there is a Christian essence to be transplanted, transposed, or indigenized in a foreign culture or context. Deconstructing the white and colonial constructs of Christ as hybrids allows marginalized communities to claim the authority to advance their own christological claims.

Second, there was an explosion of hybridized images of Jesus in the second half of the twentieth century because of the struggle for political independence and cultural identity of formerly colonized and oppressed peoples. Thus, the

37. Robert E. Goss, "Expanding Christ's Wardrobe of Dresses," in idem, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 176.

38. Ibid., 181.

Black Christ emerged in the black power movement, the Corn Mother in the struggle for sovereignty on the part of Native peoples, and the feminine Shakti from the cultural and religious resources of Indian women. Each of these constructs critiques the mainstream and oppressive images of Christ, yet draws from the biblical and the theological traditions to imagine and speak about Christ in radically new ways. The identity formation of the marginalized group influences its theologians' selection of data from the tradition as well as their work on particular facets of the notion of Christ. In effect, black male theologians focus on race and ethnicity; womanists explore the intersection of race, gender, and class; Tinker pays attention to mythic and symbolic structures; Asian women are interested in interreligious dialogue and mutual transformation.

As the understanding of the identity of a group becomes more fluid and diversified, a concomitant nuanced and diverse understanding of Christ emerges. This is most evident in the development of the notion of the Black Christ. In the beginning, blackness was reappropriated and embraced by black theologians in opposition to its disavowal and denigration by the white culture. But when the notion of blackness was in danger of becoming essentialized to legitimate Afrocentrism and to exclude other viewpoints, black and womanist theologians infused the term with new meanings, and the image of the Black Christ became more nuanced and fluid. Similarly, Asian Christian women find that a rigid and stabilized differentiation between Asian wisdom traditions and Christianity often works to support colonial power, and so they suggest a much more hybridized understanding of Jesus. The process of hybridization takes place not only between two cultures, languages, and symbolic and mythic structures, but also, and increasingly, between divergent claims and identity formations within the same ethnic, religious, and cultural groupings.

Third, I suspect one of the key debates concerning Christ will be in the interpretation of his passion and suffering. In her book *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler, a Jewish feminist theorist, has raised a poignant question in a different context: How can the subjection of a person become the most defining characteristic in the subject formation process?[39] Many white feminists have criticized the language of self-sacrifice and suffering in the theories of atonement. Delores Williams has challenged the notion of the surrogate Christ and the focus on Jesus' death instead of on his life and ministry.[40] She argues that there are enough black women bearing the cross, and that for black

39. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997).

40. Delores S. Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption," in *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, ed. Paula M. Cooey, William R. Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 1–14.

women Jesus needs to point to healing, wholeness, survival, and quality of life. Yet, in the works of Jacquelyn Grant, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Karen Baker-Fletcher, one finds renewed interest in exploring the relation between the suffering of black women and men and the suffering of Jesus. Grant, for example, points out that the image of the "suffering servant" is problematic, given the fact that black women have been treated as the servants of all in slavery and in domestic service. Religious language when spiritualized can be used to camouflage oppressive reality and sacralize the pain of debased servanthood. Thus, black women must examine Jesus' suffering through their experience of multiple oppression and liberate Jesus from the white racist theology: "Black women/African-American women were constantly liberating Jesus as Jesus was liberating them."[41] George Tinker also speaks of the important role of vicarious self-sacrifice in Native history and ceremonies. The suffering of the Corn Mother for the life of the community is at the heart of his reconstruction of Jesus. While we should not glorify suffering and senseless sacrifice, these theologians are looking for pastoral and theological insights to address the questions of suffering and healing that they see daily in their communities.

Fourth, in constructing the symbol of Christ, we have to guard against anti-Judaism, which has shaped much of the Christian imagination. Judith Plaskow, Susannah Heschel, and Amy-Jill Levine have asserted that Judaism is often presented as monolithically patriarchal to serve as a negative foil, in order to show that Christianity is liberative for women, or that Jesus was a feminist. As I have discussed, anti-Judaism was an integral part of the ideology undergirding empire building and the colonial expansion of Europe, and was brought to the colonized world through the missionaries and theological educational institutions. Some Third World feminist theologians have used the argument that Christianity "reformed" Judaism as a precursor to the argument that Christianity would also "transform" the patriarchal elements of their own cultures, without being conscious of the fact that such a statement may reinscribe both colonialist and anti-Jewish beliefs. Susannah Heschel's Jesus as transvestite raises the question of the extent to which we need to attend to Jesus' Jewish identity when we transpose the Christ symbol into another cultural context. What are the implications of the deemphasis of Jesus' Jewishness when Jesus is transposed to another culture and is interpreted as the Corn Mother or the feminine embodiment of Shakti, or seen in the images of the black women and men?

Finally, colonialist representation and anti-Jewish ideology have much to do with gender and sexual stereotypes. In what way can an "indecent Christ"—

41. Jacquelyn Grant, "The Sin of Servanthood and the Deliverance of Discipleship," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 213.

that is, a Christ who challenges conventional norms of masculinity and heteronormativity—open new avenues for our thinking about Christ and salvation? Third World feminist theology has focused on sexual exploitation such as sex tourism, sexual discrimination in the church and in the workplace, and sexual taboos such as menstruation and pollution. Seldom have we written or imagined sexual stories as sources to think about Christ, as Althaus-Reid has suggested. Indeed, how can our deepest longings, intimate desires, and fantasies be resources for our knowing about Christ? How is the love of God related to our erotic connection with others and ourselves? Instead of talking constantly about the morality of sex, how can we recover the beauty, the sublime, and the carnivalesque aspects of sex?

I would like to conclude by sharing a powerful experience I had recently in Boston's Symphony Hall as I listened to a performance of Osvaldo Golijov's *Pasión Según San Marcos* (The Passion according to St. Mark). Sung and performed in Spanish, the piece combined voice, strings, and brass, drums and percussion, and Afro-Cuban dance. Golijov is Jewish, with a Central European heritage, and he grew up in Argentina. What is most iconoclastic and nonconventional about the work is that the roles of Jesus, Pilate, Peter, and the people were sung by the soloists and the chorus without regard to numbers or to gender. Thus, Jesus was sometimes a woman, sometimes a man, sometimes a group of voices, and sometimes a dancer. I found it deeply moving to hear a Latino female vocalist sing, "Abba abba abba abba abba." The artists have ventured far ahead of us in their theological imagination. Why do we, theological faculty and students, lag so far behind and continue to find ourselves bound by the epistemological "limits" of our thinking about Christ?