

Preface

Why it matters

Plans for this book began to stir in me more than twenty years ago when I first taught a course in “Christology” (the study of the person and redemptive work of JESUS CHRIST) at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Years earlier, as a religion major at Randolph-Macon Woman’s College in Lynchburg, Virginia, and then as a student at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, I had been fascinated by all the tensions and drama surrounding arguments among Christians over the centuries about who JESUS was and what this CHRIST has been about historically for Christians-and, as importantly, for persons who are not Christian. Throughout my growing interest in Christology — as a teacher, theologian, priest, and most of all a Christian person in the world — I have wanted to write about JESUS and/or CHRIST (how to put them together is a core question for many of us). In particular, I have wanted to write about why it matters so much what those of us who are Christian actually believe about JESUS CHRIST, since all along I have known that it does matter. It always has.

It matters because, for two millennia, many followers of JESUS have borne powerful witness to the presence of the Spirit of radical love-making in history, God of justice and compassion, Holy One of wisdom and hope. Despite the widespread institutionalization and cooptation of Christianity by dominant economic and political forces in the West (increasingly, throughout the world), many JESUS-people, or Christians, have struggled courageously to be a Body of Lovers of this earth and its human and other creatures. This root of Christian vocation — the call to love radically, passionately, and steadfastly — with our whole heart and soul, mind and body — is the foundation of JESUS’ own faith and work and of his invitation to the rest of us to “go and do likewise.” This is why it matters what we think and teach about JESUS CHRIST. But there are other reasons too, many of them terrible, why it matters.

It mattered in the Crusades and in the witchcraze purges of strong women and other heretics in Europe and North America. It mattered on the mission fields in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It mattered in the relentless drive to eliminate the Native American people, cultures, and religions; in the construction of slavery as an economic, cultural, and theological system in the South; in the Holocaust as “the final solution” to a “problem” in many ways created by the anti-Semitism which Rosemary Radford Ruether has named as “the left hand of Christology.”¹

It has always mattered what Christians believe and pass on to others about JESUSCHRIST. It has mattered to women and children of different races, classes, and Christian cultures, because as the centerpiece of one of the world’s foremost patriarchal religions, “JESUS CHRIST” has been used consistently and naturally to put women and children under the authority of fathers and husbands who have learned to assume that they themselves reflect most fully the image of God the Father. Moreover, as a religious system in which “morality” has been reduced too often to sexual control, Christianity has continued for most of the past two millennia to be a movement of men’s domination and women’s submission “in the name of CHRIST,” as Tom F. Driver has

noted.² Christianity has been, in many of its manifestations, a movement to repress those uppity women and men who have dared to resist sexual and gender control

But what we Christians believe about JESUS CHRIST matters not only to people of minority racial, tribal, cultural, and religious heritages and to women, children, and all queer people — by “queer,” I mean gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered folk, *and everyone standing in public solidarity with us*. What we preach and teach and think about JESUS CHRIST matters in basic, life-or-death ways to all people, other creatures, and the earth itself.³ It matters because, for the past several hundred years-and especially here as we turn toward the third millennium, C.E. — Christianity has been conspiring with capitalism to build a global system of economic, political, spiritual, and psychological control steeped in the material and psychospiritual assumption that the self matters more than anything — more than communities of any sort, more than others, more than making right relation with others, and certainly more than the earth and creatures that are other than human.

It is true that, as a global movement, Christianity has engendered a Western-style individualism that fosters an aspiration among men and women to become autonomous (albeit male-defined) beings who are entitled to certain possessions, rights, and freedoms of mind and movement. Certainly, this is not all bad — the right to education, to health care, and to one’s own body and reproductive choices are spiritual blessings and should be universal political rights. And many Asian feminist Christians, such as Chung Hyun Kyung and Kwok Pui-lan, and African women like Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Elisabeth Amoah bear powerful witness to the *mixed* blessings and curses that have been delivered historically to their people by Christian missionaries.⁴

But Christianity’s respect for the individual self does not and cannot bear the moral weight that is absolutely essential today for the salvation of the world from the greed and gluttony and self-absorption of the so-called First World. We First World Christians have had more than enough of what Beverly W. Harrison has aptly called “capitalist spirituality.” Our self-preoccupation and self-absorption are the root of the moral rot that we in the Christian West — and especially in the United States — have been transporting globally in the name of freedom, democracy, private enterprise, and the good life.

Ironically, many feminists, other political progressives, and theological liberals and radicals of all faith traditions share this deeply moral concern with our sisters and brothers on the “Right,” including many fundamentalists of different religions. But those “who are right,” I will suggest in this book, propose a solution to the problem of Western self-absorption that is very different from what many feminists, womanists, liberation theologians, and other theological progressives are affirming. In fact, I am proposing in these pages that “those who are right” (of whatever religion or politic) tend to espouse authoritarian, moralistic, and adversarial relationships with those whom they believe to be “wrong” and, in so doing, tend to promote their own ideologies of self-absorption. It is my belief-and it is the basis of this book-that many of us who are caricatured by the Right as being heretical, or wrong, need to be evermore public and enthusiastic in *living* relational spiritualities that are mutual, passionate (fully embodied and present), forgiving, and nonviolent.

As we move into the twenty-first century, it may be that the only force in the world that comes close to being a serious threat to Christianity's own global capitalist agenda is Islam. In any case, it will matter a great deal in years to come whether we Christians (and others) are genuinely open to learning with people of other faith traditions how to cultivate more truly mutual relation with those whose religious beliefs, tribal customs, racial heritages, sexual/gender identities, and even species may be very foreign to us and so alien as to frighten us.

It is in the Spirit of yearning for mutuality that this book of mine, I trust, has come to be. Over the years, the book has grown progressively smaller! What began as a thirteen-chapter proposal has been whittled down over the past few years into this compact volume. Perhaps, if it were not clear to me that it is time to bring this project to a close, this book would eventually be condensed further into a few pages! Indeed, if I had time and energy to shape it further, it might read something like this:

What the book is about ⁵

Christians are called more than anything to be faithful, not “right.” Faithful not to religious systems or creeds; faithful not to particular saviors or institutions; and faithful certainly not to any tradition or custom that requires us to cast out or punish those who seem to us heretical, or wrong, in their beliefs or in their nonviolent customs and behavior. Even when confronted, as we are constantly, with violence around us and among us, Christians are called — yes, beckoned by the Power of Love in history — to seek nonviolent ways of responding, so as to call forth the very best in even the very worst of our brothers and sisters. This “revolutionary patience” ⁶ with one another is in keeping with how much we ourselves yearn to be called forth by those who still believe in us — those who still believe that we are able to be loving, creative, and liberating persons, regardless of how far astray we may have gone.

Through his teaching, healing, and prophetic resistance to state-sponsored and religious-based legalism that disregarded human need, JESUS reflected the incarnate (embodied) Spirit of One who was not then, and is not ever, contained solely in one human life or religion or historical event or moment. God was JESUS' relational power, more specifically his power for forging right (mutual) relation in which JESUS himself and those around him were empowered to be more fully who they were called to be. We today are also empowered by this same mutual relation.

Each and every one of us — whatever our religious, non-religious, or anti-religious identity today — lives in God. I mean by this that we are all relatives, spiritual kin, bound by a power moving among us that transcends any one time, place, or person and connects our lives and generations and communities far beyond any of our capacities to see many of these connections, much less to understand them. Still, living as we do, in God, it is never too late for any of us, regardless of whether we “believe” in God, to “go and sin no more” — that is, to come out, whoever we are, and join in the ongoing struggle for right relation with other humans, creatures, and the earth. Oregon artist Betty LaDuke's vibrant painting on the cover of this book represents to me the wonderfully colorful and active “procession” of creatures of many kinds and cultures coming out into our shared power, with JESUS, to god in the world.

In the historical place and moment in which I write, recovering addicts may realize as well as anyone, and better than most, what it means to join in the struggle for right, mutual relation. It means to make amends for the harm we have done (and we are all involved in doing harm) and to walk a spiritual path of recovery one day at a time, never relying solely on ourselves, but rather always drawing strength from our connectedness with sisters and brothers who walk the path with us.

Despite the sexist language and assumptions of its founders and many of its adherents, and despite the narrowly Christian framework that some people continue to impose upon its meetings, Alcoholics Anonymous and some of its Twelve-Step derivatives are filling up church basements with Christians and atheists and Jews and pagans and political conservatives and liberals and others, while the sanctuaries of many mainstream white Protestant churches sit half full. The reason for this seems to me quite simple. Alcoholics Anonymous invites all people to come as we are and, through sharing our vulnerability, to touch our strength and share a Higher Power, however we may experience “Him,” or “Her,” or “It” — even if our experience of this Power is a void or a blur, an angry feeling or a painful spot somewhere inside. There is no heretic. No one is right or wrong about the Higher Power. No one is even right or wrong about drinking alcohol unless, in our drinking, our lives have become unmanageable and our behavior irresponsible.

So too with Christian belief. No one is right or wrong about God or JESUS or the Trinity or any other doctrine of faith. No one is even right or wrong in our living unless our lives are becoming unmanageable — that is, violent — and our behavior irresponsible, which is what happens whenever we live primarily for our selves and our own, indifferent to others’ well-being and often hostile to those whose ways of speaking, dressing, thinking, believing, making culture, or making love may frighten us.

To whom am I writing?

I have written this book as a theological resource for spiritual transformation and social change to those who have had it with churches that make “right thinking” a criterion for membership and usually also for entry into what JESUS called “the kingdom of God.” Sisters and brothers, we can be Christians without having to pass any such litmus tests — and indeed many of us are Christian.

I offer these pages to those who are disturbed not only by the Religious Right but by all self-righteousness that comes dressed in religious garb. There are many ways to live as fully human beings in God. Religious self-righteousness is not one of them.

I write to Jews, Moslems, Buddhists, pagans, and people of other faith traditions and spiritualities who must wonder if a “Christian” is, by definition, a narrow-minded, self-righteous, and often mean-spirited bigot. The short answer is “no.” A longer answer is in this book.

I offer the book to Christian liberals, radicals, and others who love JESUS and have no desire to be “right.” Keep the faith, good friends. Hold it gently, with an openness to all you cannot know.

I offer this book to feminists, womanists, *mujeristas*, and other strong, women-loving and men-loving women whose strength and passion are a source of bafflement to most Christian prelates, pastors, and theologians of all colors and cultures. Sisters, may you keep your courage (and humor!).

I offer this as a resource to folks of various faith traditions who share a passion for justice with compassion and good humor. You are the hope of the world!

I write to those who are in recovery from addictions of many kinds—and those in recovery from “church abuse” and from what Dorothee Soelle once called “Christofascism” (violence done by Christians to people of other faith traditions as well as to those Christians have judged to be “wrong”). Yours truly is the realm of God.

I write to those who will not make peace with Christian anti-Semitism, Christian imperialism, the white racism of the Western church, or the class elitism of much Christianity around the world. You are the saviors of God, of JESUS, and of the rest of us.

I offer these pages also to those who (blessed be) will not make peace with the trivialization of, and contempt for, pagans, goddesses, and earth-based spiritualities. Your Wisdom is nourishment for all creatures on this planet and for whomever or whatever else there may be in time and space beyond us.

I offer this book to those academics who are not afraid of simple books, activists who are not afraid of complex ones, and all folks who are too smart to be “right thinking” Christians. Trust your intelligence.

I am also addressing “relational” consultants, organizers, therapists, ministers, and other healers and pastors who are weighted down these days by “professionally correct” ethics and expectations. You and we deserve a more morally honest struggle.

I offer this as a resource to mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, neighbors and friends, teachers and preachers, priests and religious leaders who want to help raise children “in faith” but who cannot, in faith, raise them up to be “right thinking” Christians. Don’t lose heart! It is too important—for the children and for us all.

I write for queer Christians. There are more of us than you may realize. Come on out — there’s plenty of work to do, and plenty to celebrate.

I write also on behalf of (if not to) other earth creatures like the maple and moss, nuthatch and hawk, our animal companions both “tame” and wild, as well as the stones and mud and water that meet us in ways sometimes welcoming and life-giving, sometimes terrifying and death-dealing, as in the hurricane which, even as I write, has devastated Honduras and Nicaragua. I do not pretend to understand how it is that we are all connected as members of creation, all of us in God — especially how we are connected with all that is so terrible and terrifying and deadly. But I believe that, somehow, we are all part of a whole — and that there are more faces of JESUS on

earth, throughout history and all of nature, than we can begin even to imagine — wherever there is a spark of hope for the sparrow or the child, the sea turtle or the prisoner.

Finally, I offer this resource in and to the Christic Spirit of Life in which we can learn and grow together, and only together, sisters and brothers. My hunch is that the best way to read it may be, for most of you, the way it was written — slowly. I hope you will take the time you need.

Notes

1. Ruether 1979.

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2. Driver 1981.

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3. Chung 1990; Adams 1995; McFague 1993, 1997; Spencer 1996; Rasmussen 1996.

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4. Chung 1990; Kwok 1995; Fabella and Oduyoye 1988.

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5. There are some important christological tasks that I am not attempting in this book, either because, in my judgment, numbers of us have paid enough attention to the concerns or because other theologians are better equipped than I to address certain issues from within their specialized theological disciplines.

In the former instance, for example, *I am not interested in probing further the tensions between “JESUS of history” and “CHRIST of faith” emphases in the development of Christian doctrine.* This historical pull serves to underscore every generation’s efforts to reconstruct “JESUS” or “CHRIST” in its own image, not in itself a problem, but dangerous. I reflected on this danger a decade ago:

The tendency to create divinity in our own image is, to some degree, universal. It is not wrong to create theological and christological images of ourselves.... But... it is destructive of the... world we share to leave the matter there-stuck on one’s own “JESUS” or “CHRIST” image. It is wrong to close the canons at the end of one’s own story or that of one’s people.... In attempting to correct such mistakes, both CHRIST of faith and historical JESUS images have... moved the debate in a circle, back again into a self-defensive posturing which signals the drawing of christological boundaries around our own sacred icons... (1989b, 19-20)

Even to think about taking sides in the “JESUS of history” and “CHRIST of faith” debate, I had come to realize in the mid-1980s, is to perpetuate the patriarchal logic of “either/or” solutions. Not that most thoughtful Christian theologians over the years have intended to do this-as they (I should say, we) have chosen either the human “JESUS” as our focus or his divine life as the “CHRIST,” in either case unwittingly downplaying the spiritual significance of the “other side.”

We Western Christians do not know very well how to think about power in non-dualistic ways. We normally cannot think of “humanity” and “divinity” in ways that do not imply the “existence” of two different entities or “beings.” Ontology, or the study of being itself, as Kwok Pui-lan has noted, is a very Western (dualistic) philosophical interest that runs contrary to much Asian understanding of reality. Assuming that Western Christians cannot simply step outside our historic cultural legacy, in which we have learned so deeply to experience our selves, the world, and God as, in some important ways, separate “beings,” how then can we even imagine living life or engaging the JESUS tradition in a non-dualistic manner? *The key to this quandary, I believe, is a radically relational experience, perception, and understanding of being itself — and of doing.* This requires us to move on beyond the JESUS of history/CHRIST of faith discussions. This movement is what I am attempting in this book.

The book also is not primarily sociology, psychology, history, or a biblical study. I am not trying here to produce a social, historical, or psychological study of JESUS or the rest of us. Others (usually biblical scholars) have done this, sometimes very well indeed, producing interpretations and assessments of the JESUS story that both challenge and assist large numbers of teachers, students, and others seeking to better understand the staying power (for better and worse) of Christian faith.

For example, I have often heard recently from people in local parishes about how exciting they find Marcus Borg’s book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (1994), in which we are invited to “meet JESUS” as a “spirit person” and ourselves as well. Feminist students and colleagues often take note of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s work, including her 1994 book, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet*, in which she continues to build a case for “the ekklesia of wo/men” as a “discipleship of equals,” in which JESUS participated as one of us. Many students of radical biblical, feminist, (and other) liberation theologies have been energized during the last decade by John Dominic Crossan’s *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (1994), in which, employing a sophisticated method of comparative textual analysis, Crossan presents JESUS as an itinerant peasant who lived and taught a simple, but revolutionary, spirituality and politic. Easier to overlook on this side of the Atlantic is a compelling, informative study on the social history of JESUS’ time and place, *Lydia’s Impatient Sisters* (1995), by German feminist biblical scholar Luise Schottroff. I mention these particular books because each of them is making an important difference in contemporary discussions about JESUS among academics in religion, especially biblical scholars. This discourse continues to be largely white, although, in the United States especially, increasing numbers of people of color are taking part.

It is not intended to be a book simply of special interest to other white lesbian feminist Christians. In these times, the voices of theologians of color speaking about JESUS are present and clear among us — and, still, they are marginalized in the pretentious, systemically racist realm of religious studies. As long as the academic guilds and mainstream religious institutions like churches and seminaries continue to be predominantly patriarchal and Euro-centric in shape and substance, the explicitly christological work of such theologians as James H. Cone, Jacquelyn Grant, Kelly Brown Douglas, Delores S. Williams, Rita Nakashima Brock, Chung Hyun Kyung, and Kwok Pui-lan will continue to be “received” within the academy as well as by mainline churches as representing “special interests” rather than all of us.

Like many sister and brother theologians of color, I too teach, speak, and write with a special *hope* that “my people” will be empowered by my words and that “other folks” will study their lives in relation to what I am doing. I want my theological work to reflect my being a white middle-class lesbian feminist Christian priest and academic, and I am satisfied that these details of my identity infuse this book. Still, like Delores Williams, Kwok Pui-lan, our gay brother Robert Goss, the peace activist Jim Douglass, and others who do Christology that is either issue-oriented (queer justice, peace, etc.) or intentionally reflective of our social locations (African American, Asian, queer, etc.), I am aware that my work is still “received” by many in the academy and mainline churches as the “special interest” pleading of a lesbian feminist.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has been critical of many women theologians on this very question of whether we make our claims strongly enough for the universal validity of our work. What Schüssler Fiorenza evidently fails to see is that almost all theologians who clearly articulate the social bases of our communities, identities, and theologies do so in order to *strengthen* the universal import of what we are saying. Her complaint is disingenuous, coming from a sister who has helped put *women-centered* biblical studies on the map. Schüssler Fiorenza, after all, is clear that she does not intend to exclude men from her “discipleship of equals,” hence her term “wo/men,” which is meant to signal gender inclusivity. So too do I, in this book, mean to reach everyone I can — everyone who is able and willing to reach toward me.

This particular project does not seek to hold primary attention to the social constructs of my being white, female, lesbian, middle-class, relatively able-bodied, or even Christian. So, while it is true that *Saving Jesus* is not written simply, much less only, “to” or “for” or “about” “people just like me” (an odd and imprecise notion!), this is still a deeply lesbian text. It is a transparently white and middle-class book, and it is very much the handiwork of a Christian woman who prays and walks dogs and hikes and tries, in person and on paper, to trouble the waters of the dominant social order in and well beyond the church. Whatever broadbased appeal the book may have will come, if it does, through my efforts to be true to these very particular roots of my life—the specific communities of people and creatures who make me who I am—in relation to JESUS and everything else.