

Review Article

Resurrecting Christianities: Critical Theories and Constructive Postcolonial, Postmodern Christianities

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Anyone working in constructive theology surely knows the age of epistemological positivism is over, such that something more than qualifying our proofs positive of a historical Jesus is at stake in the teaching of Christology. As Christians we live within the public humiliation of Christianity—within the decades consequent to its imbrication with racism, sexism, colonialism, and (especially poignant for us in Western Canada) cultural genocide, while currently the public face of Christianity has been assumed as a front for North America’s “war against terrorism.” Given the ways in which each of these structures of exclusion pivoted upon a Christological conviction, critical theories, like the practice of confession, prevent us from simply burying our sins under the insecurities of our present time. Critical theories help us remediate the ways in which our Christologies, our sacred imaginings, have been imbricated with structural oppression and the ways in which, without remediation of our symbolic imaginal, we will, among other things, metabolize these Christologies of imperial-colonial power and oedipalized disconnection from sentience. For these reasons as well as for reasons of a theologian’s own intellectual integrity and ethical responsibility, the Christological curriculum needs to be brought into conversation with critical theories.

But that said, the practice of critical theory can, in the theological classroom, be felt as yet one more, even the final and most vulnerable, challenge to any hope of religious entrustment to life. Theology students, if not Christians in the world at large, can—given the ingress of modernity and their own desire for ontological security—reach for a foundationalist approach to religion, for biblical positivism or literal-

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ism—as is verified by the turn to religious fundamentalisms, scripturally-based evangelicalism, and the insularity of narrative communities. So how can progressive Christianities attend to the psychic need of humans, given modernity's dis-embedding technologies so stressing our capacities of life entrustment, without giving up the credible intellectual critiques so important to disrupting the more destructive vectors, that is, those occasioning economic division and ecological decimation, of the globalizing of modernity? The temptation for the academic trained up in modernism may be to present students with various Jesus portraits and Christological propositions and then demonstrate how critical theories invalidate such proposals, or at least produce intellectual skepticism. Applied in this way, critical theories contribute to a modernist epistemological rationalism which elides the lived body in its social milieu and thereby undercut the confidence of the learner. But could there be a way to apply critical theories to what we teach and how we teach, such that these tools of reflection can help us not only ameliorate this age of insecurities, but resurrect Christianities?

In pursuit of that possibility, I here consider where biblical and theological colleagues, working in the dimensions of poststructuralism and other critical theories, suggest we plant or root postcolonial, post-modern conversations on Christology. When we relent our struggles for mastery over Jesus, so much a part of both liberalizing and conserving modern theologies, where does Christological discourse end up? What does the application of critical theories suggest about the shape and content of Christologies for a feminist, postmodern, post-colonial context? This is not to say that critical theories can do everything for us. The practice of theology makes claims on us—to posit value, to promote livable imaginings—which are not necessarily the responsibility of other critical theories. Critical theories can help us undertake ethical, analytic reflection on our practice and help us, through something like theological archaeology,¹ to recuperate theological wisdom from various historical strata of Christian experience.

¹ In calling up something like “theological archaeology,” I am trying to suggest that theologians recuperate not just an idea or concept, but what that belief did within its world-time, what ecclesial, somatic, and/or socio-political effects were released. Here I take my cues from Gordon Kaufman, who taught that “religious myths, symbols and rituals, rather than possessing a univocal meaning, assume their meaning and function in particular contexts” such that “their interpretation and critique demand careful attention to their embodiment within a particular time and place.” Cited in

But critical theories cannot necessarily tell us how to live. As theologian Serene Jones puts it in her contribution to *Converging on Culture*—a volume on the influence of cultural theory upon constructive theology—“cultural theorists [make] good-hearted activists,” but are not “well-seasoned community organizers,” such that imagining communal forms of life remains incumbent upon the theologian.²

Reviewing the Deconstruction of Jesus

Christology has often presumed to be about Jesus. So even Roger Haight, whose stunning revisions occasioned his silencing by the Roman Catholic papacy, nevertheless concludes that “a Christology from below (historical and embodied)” must begin with Jesus as “mediation of God’s presence,” and that “[a] Christian cannot really respond to others about the nature of Christianity without some idea of who Jesus was.” “Historical consciousness,” Haight concludes, “forces this upon us.”³ While Haight dares us to get Christology off the plane of transcendence, the insistent scrutiny of other critical thinkers—Robert Price among them—leaves us agnostic about “the” or even “a” person named Jesus. As Price writes in his *Deconstructing Jesus*, we do not know “whether even there is anyone to know about.” And he concludes, “What I am describing is . . . a ‘Jesus agnosticism.’ There may have been a Jesus on earth in the past, but the state of the evidence is so ambiguous that we can never be sure what this figure was like or, indeed, whether there was such a person.”⁴ Following the critical trajectory of Price, we cannot, despite the claims to the empirical method of those in the historical Jesus quest, lay our hands on even the Jesus of liberalism, that “radical community organizer with surprisingly prescient proto-feminist views.”⁵

Linell E. Cady, “Resisting the Postmodern Turn: Theology and Contextualization” in Sheila Greeve Davaney, ed., *Theology at the End of Modernity* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 96.

² Serene Jones, “Cultural Labor and Theological Critique” in Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner, eds., *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (New York: American Academy of Religion/Oxford University Press, 2001), 160.

³ Roger Haight, *Jesus, Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), xiii, 14, 16, 25.

⁴ Robert Price, *Deconstructing Jesus* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2000), 9, 17.

⁵ Price, *Deconstructing Jesus*, 14.

From a perspective sheerly oriented by rationalist historicism, we don't know whether there was "a" Jesus, whether there was "*One Jesus, Many Christs*,"⁶ or whether there were many persons named Jesus compiled into but one literary figuration.⁷ Thinking along the lines of Jesus as a possible figuration, Earl Doherty, author of *The Jesus Puzzle*, points out that "The Gospels are not historical accounts, but constructed through a process of 'midrash'" and that Jesus, in that vein, might have been something like a textual illustration of a holy life.⁸ Dennis R. MacDonald presses further: "The earliest evangelist," he asserts in his recent text *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*, "was not writing a historical biography, as many interpreters suppose, but a novel, a prose anti-epic of sorts."⁹ In its context, Jesus would have been recognizable as a transvalued, figural redeployment of Odysseus, MacDonald argues—an action figure more virtuous, more compassionate, more noble and inured to suffering than Odysseus, a model of what was expected of his followers.¹⁰

⁶ Gregory J. Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs: How Jesus Inspired not One True Christianity, but Many* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

⁷ New Testament scholar Marianne Sawicki has theorized that consequent to Herod's murder of the last princess of the much-beloved Hasmonean dynasty—namely, Mariamme, "to name a girl child 'Mary' [was] to assert that Herod's takeover and sellout to the Romans [could] not succeed. . . . The name Mary [was] unambiguously political, brave, and resistive." See Marianne Sawicki, "Salt and Leaven: Resistance to Empire in the Street-Smart Paleochurch" in Michael L. Budde and Robert W. Brimlow, eds., *The Church as Counterculture* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000), 76. To be sure, the nominative multiplicity of "Marys" in the gospels begs some kind of explanation. But could we not imagine then, that, rather than assuming that "Jesus was born into such a family" (p. 76) as Sawicki asserts, we have a similar symbolic protest undertaken by the nominative proliferation of many little Joshuas also? Countering Caesar's proclaimed status as "savior of the world," the insistence that "Yahweh saves" (the etymological translation of "Joshua") could equally as likely have been proliferating under Herod's and Caesar's feet. "What's in a name?" A resistance strategy in the face of Herod's collaboration with imperial Rome, perhaps.

⁸ Earl Doherty, *The Jesus Puzzle: Did Christianity Begin with a Mythical Christ?* (Ottawa: Canadian Humanist Publications, 1999), viii. Tom Harpur's *The Pagan Christ: Recovering the Lost Light* (Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2004) begins from a somewhat similar thesis about the cultural myths and cosmologies antecedent to a "literalist Christianity." Being unable to deconstruct spirit/matter dualism, Harpur argues that "Cosmic Christianity," which (he contends) assumes an inner light of divinity within us all, is the only way forward.

⁹ Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homer Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 7.

¹⁰ MacDonald, *Homer Epics*, 3, 6. MacDonald works specifically with the gospel of Mark, and Marianne Palmer Bonz does the same with Luke. Her text *The Past as*

And yet, if we leave Christological theology here, now with a fully engaged intellectual skepticism about the historical person of Jesus (which seems to be the extent to which critical theories take us in many such works or at least where many of our minds, trained up in modernism, leave off the argument), have we not retained—only now by refutation, by skepticism—the posture and infrastructure of modernist positivism? In other words, leaving Christology at this point would not even be true to the exercise of deconstruction—at least for the constructive theologian and her/his classroom. Indeed, the archeological problems of recuperating a historical Jesus hardly represent a new insight. Earlier modern theologians, like Martin Kahler and Albert Schweitzer, also well documented such problems, though without the forthrightness of the Jesus-agnosticism now evidenced and admittedly by way of a certain modernist surplus of consciousness. But in terms of the application of recent critical theories, intellectual rebuttal does not suffice. “The aim of deconstruction,” philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen reminds us, “is not mere demolition, or even reversal of values, but rather a destabilization *which permits the achievement of new possibilities*, the enablement of ‘thinking otherwise.’”¹¹ So what “thinking otherwise” might emerge in Christology if we were to follow through with poststructuralist analytics?

New Testament scholar and religious educator Marianne Sawicki—although without the Jesus agnosticism of Price—nevertheless also insists in her text *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Christian Practices* that a historical Jesus is not now textually available, that Christology cannot proceed from any such supposition. In fact, “what hinders our comprehension” and leads us to assume “that the textual delivery system that packages ‘Jesus’ means to deliver over ‘Jesus himself’ . . . is our preoccupation with commodities,” observes Sawicki.¹² Rather than offering positivist propositions of a historical Jesus, our scriptural texts offer us a certain model of praxistic replication, she

Legacy: Luke-Acts and Ancient Epic (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2000) interprets the Jesus of Luke-Acts likewise as an adaptation of the heroic epic, but with a concluding, intriguing twist: “At the center of Luke’s theological reflections is the conviction that the divine solution for human salvation involves not just the death of the beloved Son but also the rebirth of the people of God” (p. 193).

¹¹ Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1999), 8, emphasis added.

¹² Marianne Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Christian Practices* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 297.

insists.¹³ As Sawicki bluntly puts it, “The Gospels constructed Jesus.” But that said, “[t]he very madeness of these texts, their character as written works, [becomes] their most salient feature” inasmuch as “the textual makeovers of Jesus [as we have them in their multiplicity of gospels, canonical and extra-canonical] was precisely to enable Jesus to be made” by communities in subsequent circumstances.¹⁴ Where the figuration of Jesus was inserted as a textual overlay upon another strata of practice invoking the *basileia tou theou* (“the kingdom of God”), Christology emerges as communal praxis, analytically prescribed and inflected by imagination. The living texture or tissue of communal embodiment appears as “the meaning of the text.” Or as Sawicki puts it, “Text is but one device that bodies may use for conveying meaning.”¹⁵ Releasing the commodity fetish of a historical Jesus, we find that Jesus has had many hermeneutically-conceived lives within communities. There have been many and varied historic bodies of Jesus, many corporate, embodied kin-doms, evidencing various practices of the resurrection of bodies.

In this regard, Christology might best be regarded, as Sawicki puts it, as resurrection competency. “The resurrection has a history,” she observes, but it is not that which forces us into speculative metaphysics or stretches intellectual credulity. Rather the resurrection has to do with the multiplying *ecclessiai*, their spirit and their strategic and tactical practices for “resurrection.” “There were indeed ‘events’ connected with the resurrection,” Sawicki writes: “they manifested the astonishing salvific intervention of God, but they were events of *poiēses* or imaginative construction, events of the transformation of human social practices.”¹⁶ And later she expounds upon this: “The wake of the

¹³ Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord*, 8, 11. *Poiēses* implies, explains Sawicki, “a making, a creation, a generation, a fiction. . . . *Poiēses* entails creative talent and imagination” (p. 11).

¹⁴ Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord*, 8.

¹⁵ Marianne Sawicki, “No Graven Thing: Renouncing Idolatry in Religious Education,” a presentation at The Interdisciplinary Academic Seminar on “Hermeneutics and Religious Education.” Centrum Academische Lerarenopleiding, Faculteit Godgeleerheid, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, January 2003. Published on the Web at <http://mysite.verizon.net/vze3cjre/graven-013104.html> (pages 1-12), 10. Vincent Wimbush expands upon a similar understanding of text, when positing that “scriptures are and have always been about the dynamics of social scripting, social texturing, psycho-social dynamics, social exchanges.” (Cited by Velma Love in “Theorizing Scriptures Conference,” *American Academy of Religion Religious Studies News* (Oct 2004): 15).

¹⁶ Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord*, 5.

resurrection across first-century Palestine shows up as progressive disruptions in the interwoven systems of gender, race and class in that society, in a pattern that propagates around the continual remaking of Jesus.¹⁷

Resurrection was and can be recuperated as a practical competence. “The Christian tradition of bodily resurrection,” Sawicki concludes, “is a way of life that cherishes the human body and resists whatever threatens . . . bodies.”¹⁸ A strategy for hallowing bodies “compromised by colonial oppressions,” a tactic for “subversive cohabitation” of the land compromised by Herodian collaboration, the kin-dom/kingdom of God suggestively named and invited “material resistance to the hegemony of empire,” Sawicki elsewhere concludes.¹⁹ Kin-dom practices were manifested as tactical challenges—by way of redirection of sacred geography and local economy and the grammar of daily life—to empire’s seemingly ensconced inevitability.²⁰

Freeing Desire, Getting an “Exit Visa” from Today’s Empire

Unlike previous decades within which Christological theologies of liberation recuperated the agential, historical freedom of Western modernity’s “others,” our Christological projects must now address the fact that capitalism “captivates desire.”²¹ We have come to recognize that we ourselves need “exit visas” from empire, from englobing capitalism, whose effects show up in us as alienation, the razing of communities of trust, the stripping of life’s meaningfulness. Christians of earlier decades knew what to do politically and theologically with repression, with structures of exclusion—namely, have a revolution, resist, liberate. But how do we emancipate persons from luxury? How can Christianity re-circuit desire, create new subjectivities, a new humanity, that exits empire without taking leave of the earth?

Among recent trends in theology and philosophy which could help inform Christological practice at this juncture are the theologies of *theosis* or incarnational theologies, such as those evolving from

¹⁷ Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord*, 12.

¹⁸ Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord*, viii, vii.

¹⁹ Sawicki, “Salt and Leaven,” 60.

²⁰ Sawicki, “Salt and Leaven,” 77.

²¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press/Blackwell, 2000), 25-26.

feminist philosophers such as Irigaray, Bradotti, and Jantzen.²² Such philosophies can be read to address a humanity capable of spiritual becoming. Elsewhere, scholar of late antiquities Virginia Burrus in her most recent book, *The Sex Lives of the Saints*, highlights the inventiveness of early Christianities on this score. In the first centuries of the Common Era within the world-encompassment of the Roman Empire, Christianity invented subjectivities that rejected “both the comforts and confinements of conventional roles and relationships (swapping and discarding ‘identities’ like so many threadbare cloaks),” writes Burrus. According to Burrus’s interpretation, early Christianities were tremendously inventive—learning how to construct and reconstruct subjectivities with the hope of exiting empire. Persons, leaning into the limit transcending and therefore identity surpassing love of God, lived “self as a field of indefinite interpretation,” as a capaciousness for “radical metamorphosis.”²³ Encountering the love of God as a lure that traversed all normalizing and stultifying definitions of the self (that is, binary genders, ethnic and nationalist biographies, class encoding), Christians by “giving rise . . . to ever new Lives”—whether as ascetics, saints, virgins, martyrs, sisters and brothers of the kin-dom, or “‘slaves’ of God”—resisted cultural norms.²⁴ In this process of “self”-sacrifice, that is, letting go of a known and comfortable identity, and of radical self-reconstruction, Christians resisted “familial and political hierarchies” as well as other “institutionalized relations of domination and submission.”²⁵ In their stories, Burrus concludes, “we may discover not only evidence of the historic trans-

²² Jantzen’s *Becoming Divine* develops the psychoanalytic insights of Luce Irigaray into a feminist philosophy of religion. Rosi Bradotti in *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) starts from Deleuzean energetic materialist sensibilities. A number of feminist theologians, beginning with the anthology edited by C. W. Maggie Kim, Susan M. St. Ville, and Susan M Simonaitis—namely, *Transfigurations: Theology and the French Feminists* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1993)—have been incorporating the insights of French feminist psychoanalytic philosophies. To these I would add the continuing development of process theologies, including that analytic cross-over between poststructuralism and process; see Catherine Keller and Anne Daniell, eds., *Process and Difference: Between Cosmological and Poststructuralist Postmodernism* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2002).

²³ Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of the Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 18, 16.

²⁴ Burrus, *Sex Lives of the Saints*, 14.

²⁵ Burrus, *Sex Lives of the Saints*, 14.

formation of desire but also testimony to the transformative power of eros.”²⁶

Such a renewal of humanity was among our earliest Christological projects. Numerous, sometimes surprising, voices call Christianity back to this agenda—voices stretching from the neo-Marxist philosophers Antonio Hardt and Michael Negri in their massive tome *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000) to a Canadian, New Age street magazine *Common Ground*. There author Geoff Olson, in the first of a year-long series called “The Seven Deadly Spins,” which considers the ways in which consumerism has spun vices into virtues, notes how Christians, who emerged amidst the Roman Empire’s excesses, amidst culture-wide “Gluttony,” used “the abnegation of the senses . . . to oppose Rome—but without the messy and highly dangerous route of overtly political acts.”²⁷

Christianity as Path and Practice

So honed through poststructuralism, social and literary theories, Christology might emerge as a slate of constructive communal practices around the competency of arousing life-love and corporeal flourishing. When we take down the metaphysical scaffolding of “needing to be saved from this life” (as feminist critical theory along with a post-structuralist critique of metaphysics have done), Christological traditions might better be reengaged as “gathering together resources for saving actions, refusing the ideologies of world-waste, . . . people-waste, species-waste.”²⁸ In this vein, one form which Christianity might effectively take today, consequent to such elucidations by critical theory and especially given that it is incumbent upon us to interrupt Christianity’s imbrication with colonialism and the “spirit of capitalism,” might be living “Christianity as path and practice.” To try on the idea of “Christianity as path and practice” is but one attempt to try to address cultural need, to provide a path of healing and restoration of life vitality.

By calling upon the notion of “paths and practice,” I am trying to move us out of nostalgia for Christianity’s past and into an active love for the world. As Sawicki explains, “[t]he Christian tradition of bodily

²⁶ Burrus, *Sex Lives of the Saints*, 2.

²⁷ Geoff Olson, “Gluttony,” *Common Ground* (June 2004): 6.

²⁸ Catherine Keller, cited in Peter Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 40.

resurrection . . . is a way of life that cherishes the human body and resists whatever threatens the bodies of children, women and men on this planet. . . . The resurrection of Jesus is a bodily competence that is still happening . . . still making us make it happen.”²⁹ In this way of thinking about Christian faith, what becomes the central activity of Christian community would be the corporate, communal strategies Christianity has developed for living well with each other and with the earth, those practices we have learned for resurrecting, freeing, and saving bodies. Among these resurrection competencies—all having to do with bodies and their social, corporate need—would be included (1) adoption and friendship as the key ways of affiliation (not father’s name, nor mother’s biology); (2) setting up counterculture basileas (or kin-dom structures) to that of the Roman Empire; (3) practicing the politics of forgiveness; (4) following the path of humility in refusing to bend under humiliation or assuming arrogance over another, even one’s enemy; (5) renouncing mastery; (6) providing sanctuary; (7) hosting *agape* feasts to which street people were invited and at which social status was suppressed; (8) honoring the Sabbath to interrupt the economy of the worked-over body, that body which became but an economic commodity in the grind of empire; (9) a Jubilee practice of the forgiveness of debt and the release of debt-prisoners, that is, clean-slate legislation. Picnics of manna (wild bread) along with honey and fish—all foodstuffs which were not yet then controlled by the economy—suggestively demonstrated an alternative economy in which all human bodies should have access to “the tree of life,” to subsistence, without money (Isa. 55).

In the face of ancient empire, early Christianities got inventive with the habits, the pleasures, the desires, and the values of the body. An exit visa from today’s globalizing empire, its aggravation of environmental degradation and human psychic and economic poverty, may likewise come through the invention of new ways of flourishing—by way of paths and practices, that is. We can get as creative and innovative as did early Christians, who did not hang onto the body of Jesus, but insisted on “seeing the Lord”—insisted on practicing Christian freedom and love of life in such a way as to disarticulate the ways in which that empire got its grip on their bodies.

²⁹ Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord*, vii-viii.