

Take Back Jesus:

The Queer Christ Arises for the Good of All

by Kittridge Cherry



SPRING IS COMING AND THE saccharine Nativity Scenes of Christmas are making way for the gruesome crucifixion tableaux that point to Passover and Easter. Religious icons change with

the seasons, and yet the iconography remains surprisingly safe and static. Nativity scenes enshrine the nuclear family and obscure the shocking point of the Christmas myth: God became human, and in a most disreputable context—born in poverty to an unwed teenage mother.

When the usual white male Jesus hangs impassively on the cross, people may be desensitized to the violence and bigotry behind his execution.

Jesus is supposed to represent all people, including the outcasts and the sexually marginalized. Nobody owns the copyright on Christ, so the uniformity of the “holy” images raises important questions about who controls them and what purposes they serve.

My experiences as a lesbian minister and art historian have shown that people are longing for spiritually progressive images of the Divine. Many are turned off by dogmatic, male-dominated religions and the wars they fuel. They welcome reassessments that are multiracial, pro-woman, or gay-sensitive. People of faith and conscience have the right—even the duty—to create alternative spiritual iconography.

Artists are rising to the occasion by creating a more diverse range of religious art. The new visions can free the minds of viewers and start to compensate for institutional religion’s past biases and omissions.

Depicting divinity is fraught with peril, as revealed by the commandment against graven images. Every picture of God tempts the viewer to idolatry and

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requires remedy by inevitably falling short of God's infinite variety. But the followers of Jesus began making images of him almost from the start, and now countless versions have been created, each adapted for a particular audience and era. The historical Jesus was a Middle Eastern Jew, but in general Europeans make him look white, Asians picture him as Asian, and Africans depict Jesus as black. Every group needs access to the divine; so now those who have been left out of traditional Christian imagery are reclaiming, defusing, and transforming the old systems of symbolism.

This important work is not just being done by Christians. Each community's experience is unique, but there are strong parallels between Marc Chagall's mid-twentieth-century paintings of an observant Jew on the cross and the newer images. Chagall's crucified rabbi symbolizes the martyrdom of Jews everywhere. Likewise, the cross is being used to convey the suffering of other groups.

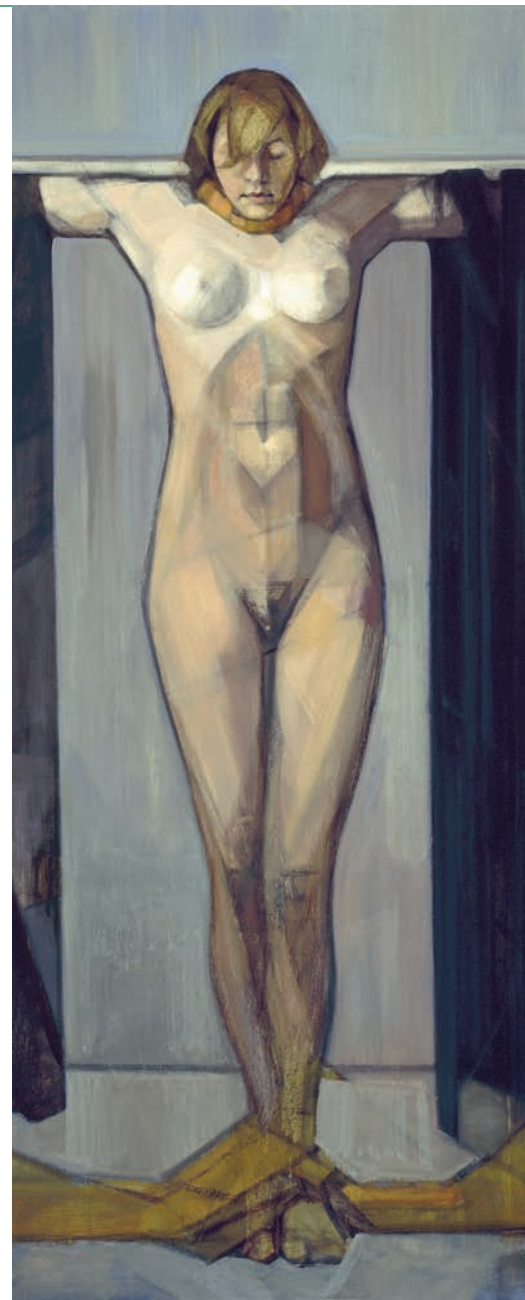
Female crucifixion in the paintings of artists such as Jill Ansell and Sandra Yagi (both of whom are Buddhist, although Ansell was raised a Reform Jew) expresses the sacrifice of all women. Janet McKenzie of Vermont paints a nude female Christ that has largely been censored by the gatekeepers who decide what gets exhibited. Called *Christ Mother*, it is a towering, gritty and majestic painting of a naked woman bound in a crucifixion pose. Another new woman-centered vision comes from Atlanta painter Becki Jayne Harrelson. She gives Mary a lesbian partner in her painting *Madonna, Lover and Son*. After all, the story of the virgin birth means that Jesus was conceived without the involvement of any man.

Today the most daring—and most needed—image of all is the gay Jesus. The queer Christ is necessary because conservatives are using Christian rhetoric to justify discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. Christ was killed for teaching radical love, and now his image is being twisted to promote hate. The Jesus of scripture broke gender rules and gender roles. He befriended prostitutes, lepers, and other outcasts. He challenged traditional family values at almost every turn, ignoring his blood relatives in favor of those who became his “brothers and sisters” by loving God and neighbor. Traditional iconography such as the Stations of the Cross and the Passion narrative are increasingly being adapted to address gay suffering, sometimes with references to AIDS. Queer Christian art enlarges the way people see God and makes it easier to recognize the image of God in oneself and in others, particularly LGBT people.

I decided to write about the queer Christ as part of my own healing process after Chronic Fatigue Syndrome forced me into a more contemplative life. No doubt I was influenced by my experiences as clergy in the LGBT community. One of my main duties had been promoting dialogue on homosexuality at the National Council of Churches (U.S.A.) and the World Council of Churches. As National Ecumenical Officer for Metropolitan Community Churches, I had helped develop gay-friendly theologies. LGBT people of faith and our allies had studied the scriptures used to condemn homosexuality, and found out that they had been mistranslated or taken out of context. Homosexuality is not a sin. In the Bible Jesus never said a word against same-sex relations and gladly healed the centurion's “boy,” the same word used for a homosexual lover. Still, we stopped short of questioning Jesus' own sexual orientation.

I count myself in the vanguard of people who are reimagining Christ as queer, although I paint my pictures with words. In my *Jesus in Love* novel series, a Christ has today's queer sensibilities and psychological sophistication as he lives out the Christian myth. I wrote about a sexual Jesus because human beings are sexual, and he is bisexual-transgender because I did not want to limit Christ's sexuality. During the writing process, Christ seemed to reveal this aspect of his all-encompassing self to me, not as a historical fact, but as a spiritual truth. Like many artists who portray the gay Jesus, I began my creative process in isolation from the others, unaware that I was part of a budding movement. Immersing myself in Christ's miraculous story of love, death, and resurrection helped me heal.

When the manuscript was almost done, I discovered that my vision was part of a larger trend. Queer Christ images are emerging now in theology books, at art galleries, on stage, and across the Internet. Seminary professors such as Theodore Jennings are seriously proposing that the historical Jesus had a homosexual relationship. I eagerly began contacting





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these kindred spirits. We became a network of support for each other. When I displayed some of the new images on my website, JesusInLove.org, the response was so enthusiastic that I compiled them into a book, *Art That Dares*. In spring 2007 some of us collaborated on the first National Festival of Progressive Spiritual Art, which gathered hundreds of enthusiastic art lovers in Taos, New Mexico.

On the other hand, many people strongly reject the queer Christ. He lives in the fertile, uncharted zone between two almost irreconcilable opposites: too gay for most Christians, but too Christian for most of the LGBT community. Artists who dare to show Christ as gay have had their work destroyed—if they can find a way to exhibit or publish at all. Many, myself included, were accused of blasphemy.

In one of the most notorious cases, all hell broke loose when Swedish photographer Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin recreated twelve scenes from Christ's life using contemporary LGBT models and locations. Her method resulted in stunning images such as *Sermon on the Mount*, which shows Jesus with gay men and lesbians clad in full black leather with chaps, chains and harnesses. Her *Ecce Homo* series toured Europe, often in churches, but the Pope expressed disapproval by canceling a planned audience with the Swedish archbishop. Opponents vandalized the art, threw rocks at the artist, and issued death threats. This kind of religious bigotry is exactly why the queer Christ is needed.

The most valid criticism is that the progressive Christ figures may violate historical fact. Nobody knows whether the historical Jesus was attracted to other men, although some contemporary scholars do think so. He certainly wasn't a woman. Jesus of Nazareth, the first-century man known through scientific and academic disciplines, was probably nothing like the new Christ figures, and that's okay, even liberating. After all, he was probably very different from the traditional Christ figures as well. The new images invite people to connect with what could be called the "myth" of Christ's life, the archetypal story that rings true to the human spirit. I believe that my own healing came from connection with the living Christ who is known through myth, faith, and meditation.

The images that strengthen me most are not Christ's birth, but his rebirth. New York painter Douglas Blanchard explored the resurrection theme in a twenty-four panel gay Passion series with Jesus as a contemporary gay man. In Blanchard's *Jesus Rises*, Christ holds another man's hand as he leads a jailbreak from a dark, crowded dungeon. He fulfills Isaiah's prophecy of a savior who releases prisoners, restores sight to the blind, and lets the oppressed go free.

This and other queer Christ images can liberate everyone. For too long people have been in bondage to conservative interpretations of Christianity's central figure. Without a broader vision, humanity is likely to continue down the destructive path of hatred, war, economic exploitation, and ecological destruction. Now it's time to take back Jesus—not just for gays, but for the good of all. ■

Rev. Kittredge Cherry is a lesbian Christian author, art historian and minister. She offers progressive spiritual resources at JesusInLove.org.