The Image of the Invisible God

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During the deanship of James Parks Morton (1972–1997), the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine in New York gained a reputation for being at least avant garde. As a tightrope artist walked above the nave and elephants lumbered down the aisle, the Cathedral became known for hosting people and events that were unexpected in general and entirely unexpected in a church.

On Maundy Thursday, 1984, a four-foot-tall bronze cruciform sculpture of a nude woman wearing a crown of thorns was put on temporary display in the ambulatory that surrounds the choir and high altar. That exhibit, in most ways a modest gesture by comparison to much of what happened at the Cathedral, drew public attention in a way little else had. Within days, photographs of Christa and articles about the image appeared in newspapers and magazines across the world.

Christa came again to the Cathedral in 2016, now a permanent gift from the artist, Edwina Sandys (incidentally, the granddaughter of Winston Churchill). It went on display on October 6, 2016, as part of a larger exhibit, “The Christa Project.”

The notice people took of the sculpture in 1984 was stirred by an internecine struggle between Dean Morton and then Suffragan Bishop of New York, Walter Dennis. At the Great Vigil of Easter at the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, Times Square, Dennis began the sermon by reading a prepared denunciation of the sculpture and of Morton for installing it.

On Easter Tuesday, the Associated Press reported on the tension between Dennis and Morton, and on Wednesday, the New York Times, the New York Daily News, and the New York Post all picked up the story. They accurately reported that Bishop Dennis had accused Dean Morton of “desecrating our symbols.” They added that Bishop Dennis had encouraged people to visit the Cathedral, view the

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sculpture, and—if they were as shocked as he was—to write in protest to the Ordinary, Bishop Paul Moore. It is no wonder, then, that a torrent of letters poured in. Dean Morton was widely quoted as saying that the reaction to Christa had been “overwhelmingly positive.” The mail, however, was overwhelmingly negative.

Almost all the articles reported that the sculpture was “behind the altar,” so many readers reasonably assumed that Christa was above the altar on the central axis. While the newsletter, “Cathedral News,” in its announcement of the exhibit, called the sculpture only “a feminine figure on a cross,” many letter writers (who apparently had not visited as Bishop Dennis had suggested) said the supposed placement suggested that it was a crucifix, all denials notwithstanding.1

Representatives and Representations

Obviously, Christa is not a historically accurate representation of the crucifixion, but few portrayals of the crucifixion are. Most images of Jesus crucified look more like the artist than Jesus. In a Feuerbachian way, artists (and preachers, liturgists, and Christians in general) tend to project onto the crucified Deity their own assumptions about the ideal human person.

This unconscious process of creating images of Jesus that look like the artist’s ideal is exposed when images of Jesus are consciously crafted, for example, to resemble peoples being newly evangelized. One letter writer from Scotland acknowledged to Bishop Moore the validity of these “subjective” depictions, but only as temporary tools. The writer—a priest—added that “one would hope that eventually the [people being evangelized] would be able to accept a Semitic representation of Christ, illustrating his historic, objective existence.” The writer did not say why that had not happened in Scotland, almost two millennia after it had been Christianized.

Like this Scotsman, none of the critics of the 1984 Christa exhibit condemned absolutely portraying Jesus in ahistorical ways, but they all insisted that to portray him as a woman misrepresented an aspect of him that, unlike race or ethnicity, was essential. As John Shelby Spong, then Bishop of Newark, wrote to Bishop Moore, “It’s fun to watch people argue about historicity when they’re talking about

1 “Cathedral News,” April 19, 1984, 2.
sexual symbols but care not a great deal about historicity when they’re talking about ethnic or racial symbols.”\textsuperscript{2}

Quite a few of the letter writers insisted that their objection to \textit{Christa} did not imply an objection to the ordination of women. Even though the 1976 General Convention had regularized the previous ordinations of women and approved women as candidates for priesthood going forward, the disagreement about women’s ordination to the priesthood was still alive in the Episcopal Church, and letter writers did not want to confuse their objection to \textit{Christa} with an objection to female priests. Still, the two are not distinct.

In \textit{Ordinatio Sacerdotalis}, the 1994 letter of John Paul II that clarified Paul VI’s 1976 \textit{Inter Insigniores}, the Pope asserted that the Roman Church “has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women.”\textsuperscript{3} The reason is representation. Because the priest, especially in the eucharist, functions \textit{in persona Christi}, that is, not merely as Christ’s representative but as a representation or icon of Christ, the priest must be male because Jesus was male. This leads to the obvious question of why the priest need not also, for example, be Jewish. Simon Francis Gaine writes about an image he owns of a Japanese Mother and Child that “any reasonable observer” could identity as Mary and Jesus.\textsuperscript{4} He goes on to say that, by contrast, he could not look at an image of an adult male and an infant female of any race and recognize it as a portrait of Mary and Jesus, “and I think that that is the case for almost everyone.” This supports, he says, John Paul’s assertion that a woman cannot function as a priest, because she lacks a natural resemblance to Christ.

The Episcopal Church’s theology of the sacramental priesthood, articulated in the \textit{Book of Common Prayer}, the canons, and other authoritative documents, does not address the question of representation as directly as the Roman Church addresses it. But the Episcopal Church implicitly and popularly makes many of the same assumptions as Rome. The claim, for example, that priests are still deacons and bishops are still priests, very common among Episcopalians, assumes a medieval, pre-Reformation ontology: that the priest is \textit{essentially}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{2} Letter from John Spong to Paul Moore, May 7, 1984.
\item \textsuperscript{3} \textit{Ordinatio Sacerdotalis}, §4.
\item \textsuperscript{4} Simon Francis Gaine, “Ordination to the Priesthood: ‘That the one who acts in the person of Christ the Head must needs be male but need not be a Jew,’” \textit{New Blackfriars} 83.975 (May 2002): 226.
\end{itemize}
(that is, ontologically) conformed to Christ in specific and permanent ways. Similarly, the tendency of Episcopal priests to ape Jesus’ actions during the Institution Narrative betrays their belief that they are in some way a representation, and not merely a representative, of Jesus. If Jesus can be represented at the altar by a woman, why can he not be represented above the altar by an image of a woman? Conversely, if he cannot by imaged above the altar by an image of a woman, how can the icon standing at the altar be female? Well beyond questions of art, how Christ is imagined and represented has ramifications for matters at the core of the church’s life.

**Becoming Like Christ**

A “fat Jesus” is a particular Cuban cigar, but Lisa Isherwood wonders why the phrase never applies to Jesus of Nazareth. By 2007, more than twenty years after Sandys’s *Christa* was exhibited at the Cathedral in New York, Isherwood could write, “We have Asian Christs, Latin American Christs both male and female, queer Christs and gay and lesbian Christs, Christ Sophia and disabled Christs. The list appears endless, but there is one notable absentee, the fat Jesus, or the corpulent Christ.”5 Isherwood, who identifies herself as athletic but perennially overweight by societal standards, uses the “Slim for Him” movement (that is, Slim for God) as an example of a societal ideal that projects its prejudices onto Christ. Slim for Him devotees see the diet industry, not as an artifact of materialism and narcissism, but a tool by which humans work to conform to God’s will manifest in Jesus: that all may be svelte.

This establishes a circularity. For if Jesus was thin, not incidentally but as a matter of divine intention, then not only must images of Jesus show him as thin, but Christians must strive to be thin. “As a theologian I see this as a blasphemy,” Isherwood writes, “a blasphemy against the divine/human reality that incarnation declares and therefore an issue that requires theological healing too.”6 Similarly, if Jesus was a man, not incidentally but as a matter of divine intention, then Christians must not only picture the glorified Christ as a man but must also consider masculinity to be the human ideal.

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In this way, Christian religious images not only project but also enforce a norm. Isherwood, in an unexpected way, implies the feminist critique: If God is a man, manliness is godly. Near where Christa hung in 1984 is the entrance to the Chapel of St. Saviour. The arch is framed by stone figures, including Michael and Gabriel. When Gutzon Borglum, one of the Cathedral’s leading artists as well as the designer and master carver of Mount Rushmore, crafted clay models for the archangels and set them in place, they were women. In 1905, actual stone images appeared, but they were men. *The New York Times* reported that a priest visiting the Cathedral had protested the female Michael and Gabriel, and the building committee had acquiesced. The article went on to say that Borglum was enraged by the decision and, because he was so personally invested in the original clay statues, smashed them rather than allowing them to be carted away as detritus.7

Newspapers across the country picked up the story: “Episcopalians Want Male Angels in Cathedral,” “Female Angels Only Pagan Goddesses, Says Archdeacon of London,” “Angels No Ladies,” and a foreshadowing of the feminist critique, “How Can Women Be Angels If Angels Can Never Be Women?”8 The Cathedral archives has no record of the complaint or of Borglum’s vandalism of his own work. His daughter claims that the newspaper accounts were sensationalistic and that Borglum and the committee had peaceably agreed that angels would be shown as masculine or androgynous. No matter how it happened, the issue was the same: the relationship between male normativity and religious representation.

The question of historicity, so central to the 1984 *Christa* controversy, does not apply to angels. There exist no angelic physical bodies needing to be accurately represented, so these two incidents would seem to be connected only because they concern the same building. Yet, how can we not wonder if the psychology beneath the two debates is not the same? Even if Borglum’s daughter is right, and if the newspapers fabricated this internecine battle almost a century before Morton and Dennis had their struggle, the newspapers surely knew their audience. The question of sex and religious representation

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Clay models of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel as women by Gutzon Borglum. Photo courtesy of the archives of the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, New York.
is charged, representing divine or semi-divine figures as female hits a nerve, and art has implications far beyond the world of art.

Some Implications of Christa for the Life of the Church

Edwina Sandys did not claim that Christa depicts the crucifixion of Jesus, Dean Morton explicitly denied it, and Bishop Moore sidestepped the issue by writing instead of how “it made me think” of the incarnation, the church, and the suffering of the entire human race, including women. A seminary professor wrote in protest that the Christa statue “has nothing to do with Christ’s mystical body, with all Christians having to bear the cross, or with sound feminist theology founded on scripture rather than poetry, although some would like to politicize it as such.” In other words, the nature of the symbol is so strong that no amount of rhetoric can make it anything other than what it self-evidently is. Whether above the altar or around the corner, it is a crucifix. Any reasonable person would recognize it for what it is, and according to Gaine, who wrote on the nature of natural resemblance in the priesthood, that is the litmus test. The image is self-evidently an icon of the crucifixion, no matter what it purports to be. No amount of arguing can make it something else.

For the 2016 installation, Christa, now mounted on a plexiglass cross, was placed above and behind the altar in the Chapel of Saint Saviour, and there it remains even though “The Christa Project” has closed. In a sermon preached in that chapel to the staffs of the Cathedral and the diocese in the last days of the exhibit, Andrew Dietsche, Bishop of New York, said that he believed that Christa is a crucifix. In the exhibition catalogue, he wrote, “I pray that we may see in Christa that there is nothing of the lives and experience of women that is not known to God, and indeed is not woven all the way through our dear Jesus.” Bishop Dietsche hopes that women and girls above all will see that their particular suffering, along with all human pain, was “lifted in and from Christ’s very person and being.” This does not deny that the historical Jesus was a man, nor does it seek to distract from his maleness. Instead, it portrays at least one truth that mere historicity obscures.

9 James Morton, inter-office memo from the Dean to the Trustees, “Subject: Exhibit of Edwina Sandys’ sculpture, 26 April 1984.”
10 Paul Moore, “Statement on the Figure of the Crucified Woman,” no date.
Christa mounted on a plexiglass cross and set on the altar in the Chapel of Saint Saviour, Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, New York. Photo by Helena Kubicka de Bragança.
The image that actually does hang above the Cathedral’s high altar is a *Christus Rex* imposed on a cross. Christ is imaged as a priest–king, vested, crowned, and ruling. It does not deny the historical horrors of Jesus’ passion and death but reveals one truth hidden within them. To cling to the *Christus Rex* and to exclude more historically realistic views would not only impoverish but also subvert the church’s understanding of the complex interrelationship of suffering, death, and life: the Paschal Mystery. With *Christina*, it is the same: the image must be seen in the context of others but it cannot *prima facie* be excluded.

Recognizing *Christina* as a crucifix does, indeed, have an impact on the church’s understanding of the priesthood. If a female image can represent Christ on the cross, than can a woman not be ordained? While the Episcopal Church decided that issue long ago, it did not address the issue of *in persona Christi* in the same systematic way Rome has. One solution would be to let go of the notion that the priest is *in persona Christi*. A more fruitful one would be to ask how a person who is not of the same sex as the historical Jesus can be *in persona Christi*. Sarah Coakley, herself a priest in the Church of England, has embraced the notion that the priest is an icon of Christ, counter to both Reformation and modern liberal tendencies to imagine the priest in more functional terms, through a careful re-reading of Thomas Aquinas. Art and theology are interrelated, so that art, perhaps especially provocative art, not only depicts the official theology but may give rise to it. In both, the truth comes more fully to light.

If the significance of the cross-event is not obvious on the face of it, making images like *Christina* is not only permissible but even necessary. The unexpected image can uncover truths that more didactic modalities cannot. Nicola Slee, who has written more than anyone on Christa images, recognizes, “There is a strong theme throughout the resurrection appearances of Christ incognito.” The risen Christ is generally unrecognizable and surprising, even to those closest to him. They must let go of their expectations so they can encounter a Christ who is both continuous with yet not identical to the Jesus they knew. Mary Magdalene learns that knowing the risen Christ demands loss even as it promises gain. Accepting the death of Jesus as she knew him is the precondition for experiencing Jesus in

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his glory. She must accept that she cannot cling. This is what Louis-Marie Chauvet calls assenting to “the presence of the absence.”¹⁴ The absence of the physical body of Jesus is the necessary condition for his presence in the mystical body, the church. Images like Christa challenge simplistic notions that the resurrection is a simple matter of a dead man coming back to life, and unmask the idolatry of clinging to certainties that masquerades for faith. Christa is not an image meant only for women or even a visual meditation about women’s pain. It is about the nature of the truth revealed in Christ.

The 2016 Christa exhibit got a little press, but not much. Hardly any letters came, and only a few people phoned. As Bishop Dietsche remarked in that same sermon, the lack of much reaction may mean that the church has reached a new theological consensus, but it may also mean that Christianity has become irrelevant in most people’s lives. Some of the writers in 1984 saw Christians losing ground, and they thought that displaying Christa in the Cathedral would drive even more people away. More than thirty years later, more and more people have, indeed, wandered away and most people have never had a relationship with the church at all. Images like Christa no longer shock or offend, so they seem to have lost their force. They may, however, hold a different power now. They may offer to people who are strangers to the narrative a way in and a path to the historical Jesus, rather than, as some feared in 1984, a road going the other way.

¹⁴ Louis-Marie Chauvet, Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995). The presence of the absence” is a theme that runs through the book, but see, for example, “The Trial of Faith or the Consent to Loss,” 170–178.