

## ENCOUNTERING JESUS THROUGH THE EARLIEST WITNESSES

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WHAT COUNTS AS normative in feminist theologies has been a matter of much debate. In a previous work, I spoke of balancing the norms of appropriateness and of credibility, of what is centrally Christian and what is credible in the contemporary world.<sup>1</sup> In determining the norm of appropriateness (what is centrally Christian) I followed Willi Marxsen and Schubert Ogden who find that norm in the earliest layers of witness in the Synoptic Gospels.

Sometimes readers have confused attempts to situate the norm of appropriateness in the earliest witness with attempts to identify the "historical Jesus."<sup>2</sup> In this note I wish to return to the locus of the norm of appropriateness in the earliest Christian witness in order to focus on one salient point that illumines some central christological issues in a helpful way and makes clear that the norm is not located in the historical figure of Jesus, but in the interactions between Jesus and his first followers as those are recounted in the earliest strands of the synoptic witness. Although I recognize that appeal to the earliest layers of the synoptic tradition is not currently the most fashionable form of New Testament scholarship, I explained in *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology* why I continue to see it as both biblically sound and theologically central to understanding the New Testament witness. I appeal now to the normativity of this earliest layer, but I am convinced that even those who reject such a criterion of normativity can find something of use in the relational Christology I am proposing here.

The norm I propose is not one derived from an isolated historical figure but from the relationships formed between Jesus and those who encountered him. This is a relational Christology, one that sees the importance of Jesus in and through the witness of those on whom he had an effect. It redefines the locus of Christology so that it is not in Jesus in himself, but in the interactions between Jesus and his earliest followers. This allows for a refocused look at traditional christological questions and answers, and attends in a helpful way to some feminist concerns about Christology.

In this relational Christology, the question "Which is the normative

<sup>1</sup> See my *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of Method* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 73–90.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Ellen Leonard's review of *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology*, in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 20 (1991) 116–17, and Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 68.

Jesus?" is not answered by reference to some supposed "historical Jesus" who cannot, in any event, in my view, be recovered from behind the texts,<sup>3</sup> but by reference to the texts that recount the effect of Jesus on those earliest followers who encountered him. "Jesus" is always "the Jesus to whom certain people responded in faith and then communicated that faith to others," or "the Jesus who evoked a particular response from those earliest witnesses." Thus any claims we make about Jesus—for example, that Jesus is the Christ or the Savior—are claims about this Jesus and no other.

To begin with this Jesus is to begin with the texts of the Synoptic Gospels. This starting point is not the same as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's, for example, who begins with a different norm (the *ekklēsia* of women) and a different assumption (that the christological importance of Jesus is his leadership in one of many messianic movements at his time, a movement for the *basileia*, a movement which included men and women). I begin with the assumption that, because Christianity is a movement which grew up around Jesus, one can only understand what is truly and centrally Christian by recourse to Jesus, and thus that at least one norm for Christian theology must be derived from him.<sup>4</sup> In the end, I hope it will be clear that, although Schüssler Fiorenza and I have different ways of coming at the question of norms for Christian theology, our goals are the same: to create in the present an ecclesial reality that does not inscribe and perpetuate what she aptly calls "kyriarchy."<sup>5</sup>

Both Rita Nakashima Brock and Mary Grey propose relational christologies. Brock thinks that we need to move beyond Jesus to see the "full incarnation of God/dess in life-giving relationships."<sup>6</sup> For her, a narrow focus on Jesus misses the importance of seeing/experiencing Christ in what she calls the Christa/community in relationships where erotic power, the power of our interrelatedness, heals brokenheartedness. Erotic power incarnates the divine Eros.

In the end, Brock does not see Jesus as central to Christianity; he is only one actor in the possibility of healing brokenheartedness. Her focus is on the Christa/community alone as the locus of relational healing. And, although here I argue that the community is crucial to understanding Jesus' importance, Jesus is not, in my view, an incidental actor in this process but, for Christians, its central focus. Additionally, Brock does not grapple with the problem of sin and evil as systemic and difficult to uproot.

<sup>3</sup> See my *Feminist Theology / Christian Theology* 83–84.

<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.* 78–79.

<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza defines "kyriarchy" as "the rule of the emperor/master/lord/father/husband over his subordinates" (*Jesus Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* [New York: Continuum, 1994] 14).

<sup>6</sup> Brock, *Journeys by Heart* xiii.

For Grey,<sup>7</sup> relationship is important because we can emulate Jesus' relation to God. She stresses the example of Jesus and, in particular, the example of Jesus' suffering which we seem to be called to replicate. Grey sees "mutuality-in-relating" as "the key to Jesus' developing personality, self-awareness and relationships with the men, women and children of his life, as well as the drive to his understanding of his mission to save the world."<sup>8</sup> Grey thinks Jesus "grew into the fullness of redemption."<sup>9</sup> She focuses on Jesus more than Brock does, for she sees mutuality in relating as breaking through in the life of Jesus and setting redemption in motion for the Christian tradition. Grey also emphasizes voluntary suffering as a way to attain more just forms of relationship.

Although Brock and Grey see relationship as central to understanding Christology, for both of them the locus of the relationship is, in my view, misplaced. The critical locus of relational Christology is neither the relation of Jesus to God nor the relation of believer to community, but, first and foremost, the relation of earliest believers to Jesus.

#### WHAT DOES A RELATIONAL CHRISTOLOGY ACCOMPLISH?

The relational Christology that I am proposing makes it clear that Christians are not interested in an isolated and decontextualized Jesus whose words and acts may be discerned with historical certainty, but in a Jesus whose context is crucial to his significance. We can begin to see the intertwining of present and past understanding of Jesus. Present understanding of Jesus is important because those of the past reacted and responded to him in certain ways. Present understanding depends, for its existence, on the faith of early followers. Just as there would be no Christian movement without Jesus, neither would there be such a movement without the response of the earliest believers. However much our present contexts may push us to look at Jesus again and to reinterpret him for our time (we shall examine this later), and however important present context is for understanding him, we have no access to him at all except through the earliest witnesses of faith that gave rise eventually to both the biblical texts and the continuing community that came to be the Church.

We do not look to the earliest layers of witness to Jesus for a pseudo-scientific objectivity, as Schüssler Fiorenza seems to believe.<sup>10</sup> One does not look to the earliest witness to find "proofs" about Jesus that would otherwise be lacking, but to discover continuities between the earliest believers and later believers that indicate a meaningful rela-

<sup>7</sup> Mary Grey, *Feminism, Redemption and the Christian Tradition* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 120.

<sup>10</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus* 75.

tion between present-day Christianity and the movement that arose from responses to Jesus. The earliest witness is about particular experience evoked and the continuities of that experience into the present. It does not ground or guarantee the truth or superiority of the witness, it simply places the witness where and as it is. Yet it does not make sense to me to try to separate the present from the earliest witness because the Christian movement began historically with Jesus and needs to be connected to its historical beginnings.

As the synoptic texts indicate, women were among those first followers who responded to Jesus. To place the locus of Christology in the relation between Jesus and earliest believers is to recognize that Christology is not first concerned with making claims about a male, but is concerned with the responses of women and men to this Jesus. One still has to deal with the maleness of Jesus, but if the locus of Christology is not Jesus in himself, but Jesus in relation to others, this puts claims which are made based on Jesus' maleness into a different perspective. If Christology arises from responses to Jesus, then Jesus' maleness is in no way central to Christology nor essential to his work, and no claims based on that maleness can be sustained.

Christology arises not from a man who acted "objectively" and unilaterally to change the lives of others, including women, but from the experience of being changed that happened to both men and women, creating a total event that was communicated in turn to others. This experience was, admittedly, an experience of Jesus, but its meaning is only given as those earliest followers found in this experience something that changed their lives. When, in the Christian tradition, we speak of Jesus, we delude ourselves if we think we speak of an isolated individual whose words and actions could be known and have meaning apart from the changed lives of those who first responded to him.

We understand Jesus' importance because the effect he had on others led them to want to communicate this to those who came after them. Such an understanding helps us to see that there is a very real contingency in the beginnings of Christianity. That the rise of Christianity depends in part on human responses to Jesus impels us to rethink certain views about the centrality of Jesus to human history and the coercive action of God in the world. It reveals that history is the result of human choices and human freedoms, not of some imposed coercive will of God. The Christian tradition is a movement with historical beginnings and one which has changed over time. History shows us that Christianity is neither final and unalterable nor absolutely free-floating above its historical beginnings.

Understanding Jesus through the witness of others to him illumines our understanding of claims about the humanity and divinity of Jesus. In the tradition we have often interpreted the Jesus of Scripture through a particular understanding of traditional language about Jesus that wants to make a simple equation between Jesus and God. "Jesus is God," many have wanted to say. To some, claims to be "fully

divine" are taken to be literal statements about a "historical" Jesus who, simply, was God. And I am convinced that this view is in part rooted in seeing in the New Testament texts an isolated and contextless Jesus who was God whether anyone actually noticed it or not. Such a reading is often supported by searches for a historical Jesus and contributes to the notion that somehow faith in Jesus can be scientifically grounded or justified. In this sense, Schüssler Fiorenza's criticisms of misplaced objectivity are well-founded: "Its emphasis on the *'realia'* of history serves to promote scientific fundamentalism since it generally does not acknowledge that historians must select, reject, and interpret archaeological artifacts and textual evidence and simultaneously incorporate them into a scientific model and narrative framework of meaning."<sup>11</sup>

When we notice that we can only approach christological questions through the experienced effect of Jesus on others, we see that the central questions that Christology answers are broader than the simple (and perhaps misleading) question "Who was Jesus?" Questions about who the first followers thought they had experienced and about the novelty and effect of their experience of Jesus arise before questions about who this Jesus must be for such experiences to be possible. And alongside such questions arise questions about how such an experience could be possible for others who had not met Jesus directly.

In other words, as presented to us in the early witnesses to Jesus, those who followed Jesus had experiences of grace, of healing, of wholeness, of being called from some lack of integrity to the possibility of fullness of life, and they understood these experiences as having their source in God. As Willi Marxsen makes evident in his distinctions between Jesus tradition, Christ tradition, and Jesus Christ tradition, it took time for the experience of God that the first followers had in and through Jesus to be turned into particular titles for Jesus and speculations about Jesus' person.<sup>12</sup> Christology is not first and foremost about Jesus in himself, but about the experience of God's grace that the first followers had in their relation to Jesus. Thus, Christology answers questions about what contributes to fullness of life, about the God who offers that fullness, and about the identity of Jesus as the one through whom that fullness is offered.

If the relation between Jesus and his hearers, that is, the experience of grace that they had in his presence, is what is important, this also influences the way in which we think about what it means to follow Jesus. Since the Enlightenment, and particularly since the various searches for the "historical Jesus," much emphasis has been laid on the example of Jesus as though emulation of this example is that which produces or guarantees salvation. But, because our only access to Je-

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 87.

<sup>12</sup> Willi Marxsen, "Christology in the New Testament," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 146-56.

Jesus is through recounted experiences of grace, our central salvific focus is not on the example of Jesus but on the ways in which the lives of those who encountered Jesus were changed by grace. The salvation evoked through Jesus is an experience of God's grace empowering changed lives and drawing them beyond themselves. The tests are not meant to be a list of rules that, if we follow them well enough, will guarantee salvation, but a telling of the story of grace-full experience that can, in turn, be the agent of that experience in our lives.

Making Jesus' example or practice the central focus of Christology might lead to the same sort of objectification or pseudo-scientific claims for him that Schüssler Fiorenza sees arising in the search for the historical Jesus. If one depends solely on example, then what about situations that do not arise in the Gospels? There is no blueprint for a nonoppressive political system in the Gospels, although we can read hints from the changed relationships brought about through Jesus. Nor are there explicit answers to modern dilemmas such as the ecological crisis or the threat of nuclear holocaust.

#### CHALLENGES

The experience of those earliest followers leads us away from individualism. I am not, nor can I be, in direct relation to a Jesus unconnected to the community of faith. Only through the community of faith was and is the memory of Jesus kept alive. Even if I talk about a direct experience of the risen Jesus Christ, I only know that this experience is an experience of Jesus because of the witness of faith passed down in the community. This challenges an individualized religiosity, a notion that somehow I can be a follower of Jesus in my isolated individuality without any relationship to the broader world. If I want the experience to be one of just "me and Jesus," I have distorted its communal beginnings.

Much debate has focused on whether the earliest Jesus movement was a movement for political and social liberation. Before the Enlightenment we do not expect to see connections between the radical message of God's grace and the human actions that ought to follow on that so as to change not only individual lives but humanly created social and political systems that perpetrated systemic evils. Still, positing the locus of Christology in the relationship between Jesus and the earliest hearers clearly implies an understanding of salvation much broader than mere concern for the individual.

The relational Christology presented here does have an element of individualism. The grace made available is a grace to which individuals as individuals must respond. In this sense, salvation has an individual focus. But it does not lead to an individualism where, in being concerned about my own salvation, I have no need to be concerned about others. Whether I recognize it explicitly or not, it is the faith of others, their response, that make possible my experience of grace through Jesus.

Nor, in the late-20th century, should there be a narrow concern with the "salvation" of individuals as though that salvation had nothing to do with the conditions of everyday lives and with people as whole human beings. Those who responded to Jesus received fullness of life. Indeed, the texts indicate that fullness took a variety of forms and was directed to the specific situations in which people found themselves. There was a vision of a kingdom, a commonwealth where grace, fullness of life, abounded. Followers of Jesus sought to communicate the fullness and its possibilities to others. Whether or not the earliest followers had a sense of the social and political implications of seeking fullness of life for self and others, we in the late-20th century realize that humanly created social and political orders may systemically prevent the fullness of life for many. Consequently it is necessary to challenge not only individuals who stand in its way, but social, political, and ecclesial orders that prevent it; it is necessary to challenge what Schüssler Fiorenza calls "kyriarchy." The political analysis needed is specifically contemporary and contextual, but some of the tools to mount that challenge come from grace experienced as the source of fullness of life.

If the important element in Christology is the human relation to Jesus, and if we can still be in relationship with Jesus in the present through the ecclesial community, why should the relationship of those earliest followers be any more normative than our own relationship to Jesus in the present? Quite simply because we would not know it to be a relation to Jesus at all, if it were not a relation through those first witnesses. We become interested in Jesus only because of his effect on those who followed him and told others about their experience. Our relation to Jesus comes to us through their relation. Indeed the community of faith throughout the centuries has sought to keep that relation alive by its emphasis on Scripture. As long as Christianity appeals to Jesus as its foundational moment and speaks of him as Savior or Christ, we need to appeal to our beginnings to see and understand if our experience of Jesus in the present is in any way connected with their foundational experience.

Such a focus on Jesus does not mean that one can or does encounter God only through a relationship to the Jesus portrayed in the scriptural witness. Some have shied away from claims about Jesus as Savior or Christ because of traditional exclusivist assertions that those who do not thus claim him will be excluded from salvation. The focus on relationship to Jesus as the locus of Christology is not meant to suggest that one can encounter God only in Jesus or that the fullness of life offered in that encounter is not offered anywhere else. Rather, it is an attempt to understand the specificity of the beginnings and continuation of this particular religious tradition, recognizing that all religious traditions, whatever their appeal to more general aims, have specific historical and present loci. The call to fullness of life for self and the rest of creation that Christians have experienced in their en-

counters with Jesus through text, community, and spirit, may very well be experienced by others as arising from specific situations and encounters in their own lives.

Thus, a focus on relationship with Jesus does not foster anti-Semitism. Christianity arose out of Judaism. Christians have often contributed to anti-Semitism in the name of Christianity. One does not have to seek to establish that Jesus was atypical of his time or his religious background in relation to women or to anything else in order to understand the possibility of a movement growing up around him where people commend to others their experience with and through him, and where eventually explicit claims about him arise.<sup>13</sup> The fact that this figure gave rise to a particular historical movement that has sustained itself over time does not mean that one has to argue either for the superiority of this figure or for the superiority over Judaism of the religion to which he gave rise. Claims about Jesus as experienced by his earliest followers and about the salvation found through this experience do not need to rest on any notion of superiority or exclusivity.

Does a relational Christology have any political power? Does it challenge kyriarchy? Admittedly, such a christological locus does not see the challenge to kyriarchy arising from the direct political involvements of Jesus or his earliest followers. The connection is both more indirect and more contextualized. Whether or not the early Jesus movement was a movement for political emancipation is not as crucial for action in the present as is knowledge that the fullness of life invoked and evoked by Jesus has inescapably political implications in the present that force the challenge to kyriarchy or fall short of their fullest ramifications.

The relationship evoked by Jesus is one that calls for fullness of life, not just for the few, but for all. In the late-20th century we are aware of the ways in which humanly created social and political systems (including ecclesial systems) order the lives of those within them, often to the advantage of the few and the disadvantage of the many. The fullness of life that is central to the Christian witness of faith cannot be attained without, in the present, challenging political and social systems that make such fullness of life impossible or difficult. Such a challenge does not depend either on knowing what a "historical Jesus" did or on knowing the political actions of an early Jesus movement, but on a message of fullness of existence for all and an analysis of the present situation which does not overlook any of the barriers, personal or political, to that fullness of existence.

The early Jesus movement did include women and men and was addressed to all as interpreters and experiencers, not just to some. As the movement was recalled and passed on by its earliest followers, it manifested no signs of following an established order of domination

<sup>13</sup> See Schüssler Fiorenza's critique (*Jesus* 82-88).

and subordination. The message was one of grace and demand—the experience of the grace of God as the force empowering the possibility of fullness of life, the demand that one live out that fullness of life in relation to both God and others.

Looking to the earliest witness of faith rather than to the whole of the New Testament, or even to the whole of the Gospels, may seem to some reductionistic. Considering the earliest witness as normative does not mean ignoring later reflections on that witness that might well illuminate it in ways that give us depth and insight into what it means to be in relationship to Jesus. I look to the earliest witness because it allows us to get as close as possible to the experiences of those earliest followers, and I regard those experiences as that on which the rest of the tradition is based and which it interprets. Even reflections on the empty tomb or the appearances of the risen Jesus depend, in my view, on the prior recognition of the importance of others' experiences of Jesus during his lifetime. Not all that can or ought to be said of Jesus or of the relation of others to him is contained in the earliest witness. But unless what is said accords with the earliest witness, that is, unless it reflects the kind of experience and relationship evoked in that earliest witness, then we run the risk of being cut off from our historical and experiential roots; our way of defining the tradition would then come only from our present circumstances and questions without regard to our past. This would mean, on the one hand, that one can easily rid a tradition of its most oppressive elements, for none of its traditional elements is essential. On the other hand, it would mean that there is nothing central to the tradition that can be used to challenge more oppressive forms of that tradition.

Seeing the locus of Christology in the relationship between Jesus and his earliest witnesses forces us to look beyond an isolated male savior figure to the complexity and richness of our own relationships with God, with Jesus, and with others. Such a christological locus presents grace as relational, grace offered and accepted. Relational Christology does not rob Christology of its political implications, indeed it recognizes the power of relationship to God through Jesus to evoke change. A Christology of relation challenges patriarchy and kyriarchy while still acknowledging the centrality of Jesus to ongoing Christian tradition.