

Imparted and Indigenous Images of Christ

Essay for
Foundations in Christian Spirituality

MA in Christian Spirituality

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Imparted and Indigenous Images of Christ

*And did those feet in ancient times walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God on England's pleasant pastures seen?*

Blake'sⁱ famous words for the hymn *Jerusalem* from the preface to *Milton*, have been much studied and analysed - and his meaning not always conclusively discerned. One would still not hold Blake alone responsible; but the concept that Jesus Christ may in some respect have visited the shores of the British Isles, or indeed the whole idea that "God is an Englishman" is rather more deeply engrained in our culture than many today would be happy to admit or espouse. The answer to Blake's question must surely be 'no'. This essay is an exploration into how Christ is perceived by those not from the white Anglo-Saxon - some might add imperialⁱⁱ - perspective that was, or is, so often prevalent in this country.

This is not the place to explore the good that came from the work that missionaries have done across the globe, and indeed, there is much to celebrate. I must state a vested interest, as the three generations of my family before me were all missionaries in South Asia over almost a century. However, it also has to be acknowledged, that not all of the legacy left behind the missionaries generally was positive. In particular, the Gospel sometimes became tainted with the channel it was ministered thorough, sometimes leaving the local church with a particular flavour or impression of the Gospel and the Christ it proclaims.

David Bosch points out the 'the Christian faith never exists except as "translated" into a culture'.¹ Each Christian denomination has its own (horror?) stories where things did not work out so well, but a couple of illustrations from the

Anglican tradition will serve to demonstrate. In the old wooden Anglican cathedral in Auckland New Zealand, there is a stained glass window of the first indigenous priest Rota Waitoa², priested in 1860. But, in his dress, he is indistinguishable from any of the white 'Pakeha' Anglican clergy of his time. In parts of Africa today, there are still areas where Cranmer's Prayer Book, literally translated, along with the dress and the Bible of that time are still *de rigueur*, with translated Victorian hymns, and priests in black cassock, surplice, and preaching scarf. At the 1998 Lambeth Conference a number of the African bishops showed concern at the way the 'Mother Church' in the 'Mother Country' had lost its way.

Newbigin quotes Roland Allen, a missionary in China in the early 1900s who cut across much of the 'received wisdom' of his time, rejecting the appropriateness of the creation of replicas of the 'home churches', equipped with everything from archdeacons to harmoniums.³

Visualizing the Incarnation

Sunday school images, particularly from Victorian times onward, portrayed a 'Gentle Jesus, Meek and mild'⁴, often with white skin, light brown or blonde hair, and blue eyes (some examples, from a variety of cultural backgrounds, are given in the Appendix). What are the origins of images of Christ?

Some religious traditions prohibit the use of artistic imagery altogether, or at least in a greatly simplified form. Among the reasons for this are: there are no clear

¹ Bosch, p447

² Rota **Waitoa**, the first Maori priest, was friend and travelling companion to Bishop Selwyn, NZ's first bishop, for 12 years before he was ordained deacon in 1853, - and it was years again until he was priested, in 1860, by a different bishop.

³ Newbigin 1989 p148

⁴ Charles **Wesley** (1707-1788), Hymns and Sacred Poems, *Gentle Jesus* 1742

images of Jesus represented in the New Testament; and also the interpretation of the Biblical Commandment on making graven images can be influential⁵. This is exemplified by the stance of, for example, the Puritans; and remains deeply embedded in Reformed theology even today, where the subtlety of the difference between iconography and idolatry are still not always perceived.

This concern about the created (or perhaps, rather, the re-created) form, is paralleled in some ways by the Islamic tradition that prevents not only the depiction of any created being⁶, but also restricts perfection to God alone, as commonly understood with the ‘mistakes’ in their geometrically patterned carpets.

Where then, are the origins of the artistic representations of the image of Christ? ‘Icons’ are among the first that come to mind from the Early Church, and are to this day used as part of the communities life and worship. Numerous legends exist to explain their creationⁱⁱⁱ.

The debate on whether it was permitted to create or venerate icons, pictorial representations of Christ, the Mother of God, or of saints, was a very prominent one from 726 for over a hundred years within the Orthodox tradition. Among the chief defenders of the icons was St. John of Damascus (d. c. 749). He in particular linked the ‘matter’ that the icons were made of, and represented, with the incarnation, for through ‘matter my salvation came to pass’. Icons are not worshipped, says Ware, they are merely honoured.⁷ They operate as liturgical art, which only truly function as icons in the context of prayer. Apart from that they become no more than pictures with a religious subject. Iconic prayer is called *cataphatic* (as opposed to the

⁵ McGrath, p 111

⁶ McGrath, p 112 also spots this parallel

apophatic, non iconic prayer, such as the Jesus Prayer) within the Orthodox tradition. Icons act as a window, says McGrath, through which the worshipper may catch a closer glimpse of the divine.⁸

Yet icons are perhaps not the earliest representations of the image of Christ. The prize for those goes to the images in the catacombs of Rome, or the church of Dura Europos on the banks of the Euphrates.⁹ In these, Jesus is represented as the Good Shepherd, with a lamb on his shoulders. However, Jesus is here not shown wearing the cloths of a Middle Eastern shepherd, but those of a young Roman patrician, giving an interesting twist to the perceptions of what Jesus really looked like – but is that *their* perceptions that are twisted, or *ours*?

To prevent us getting too distracted with Christology rather than spirituality, we shall initially take a look at the work of spreading the *euangelion*, the Good News of Christ incarnate, and applying it as a working spirituality, through the work of the missionary theologian Vincent Donovan.

The Masai through American eyes

Donovan was a priest with the Catholic Mission at Loliondo on the Masai Mara, bordering on the Serengeti Plains of Tanzania, close to the Kenyan border in East Africa from the mid 1960s. He had initially been involved with the school and medical mission on the station, but soon realised that though this was of considerable social and medical assistance, it was having ‘zero’¹⁰ impact on the faith of the Masai. Proposing a radical new style of mission, he asked for permission to simply *be* with

⁷ Kallistos Ware, in Jones et al, 1986, p196

⁸ McGrath, p 61

⁹ The Christ we Share, p iii

¹⁰ Donovan, p15

the Masai and see why the Christian teaching of the children seemed to be so easily sloughed off as they returned to the ‘pagan’ villages, and if it were possible to convey the faith more effectively by some other means. He published his ‘*Epistle from the Masai*’, ***Christianity Rediscovered***, in 1978, and the book had an immediate and profound impact on the perceptions of mission. His insights, and what he had learned from the Masai clearly influenced him, and others, deeply.

God, for the Masai, is *Engai*, the only God, and they have many names for him; - him though is probably a misnomer, as he is sometimes called male, and sometimes called female; they also sometimes call him other descriptive names, such as rain, which is a particularly pleasing manifestation. When he is kind and propitious they call him the black God. When he is angry, he is the red God.

In trying to explain some of the Biblical stories to the Masai, Donovan came up against some unexpected problems. The creation stories were significantly ‘agriculturally biased’ as far as their own much more veterinarian community was concerned. Indeed, only a barbarian would cut open the topsoil exposing it to the ravages of the sun, and possible desertification.¹¹ On another occasion, whilst trying to explain Jesus’ stilling of the waves, it became clear to Donovan that *sea*, *boat* and *storm on the waves*, were all concepts that had no meaning to this dry-land oriented people, and the stories would need other ways of being described.

After some months of trying to explain the Christian faith to a particular community, Donovan had got to the stage where some were nearing the time for baptism. Looking around the group gathered, he started to differentiate between those whom he thought had grasped the faith enough, and those who had not, and on

this basis, allot who could, and who could not, be baptized. The elder, Ndangoya, stopped him politely but firmly:

“Padri, why are you trying to break us up and separate us? During this whole year that you have been teaching us, we have talked about these things when you were not here, at night around the fire. Yes, there have been lazy ones in this community. But they have been helped by those with much energy. There are stupid ones in the community, but they have been helped by those who are intelligent. Yes, there are those with little faith in this village, but they have been helped by those with much faith. Would you turn out and drive off the lazy ones and the ones with little faith and the stupid ones? From the first day I have spoken for these people. And I can speak for them now. Now, on this day one year later, I can declare for them and for all this community, that we have reached the step in our lives where we can say ‘We believe’.” *We believe*. Communal faith. Until that day I had never heard of such a concept, certainly had never been taught it in a classroom.¹²

Further, Donovan, in working with the people of these communities, was attempting to instil in them an understanding of the importance of the Eucharist. In particular, this was not something to be taken lightly, but in a considered manner.

For the Masai, that meant a communal decision. He records:

I never knew if the eucharist would emerge from all of this. The leaders were the ones to decide yes or no. We had tried to teach these people that *it was not easy to achieve the eucharist. It was not an act of magic* [my italics] accomplished with the saying of a few words in the right order. One wonders how often we really do achieve the eucharist in our lives. If the eucharist was not an offering of their whole life – the family raising, the herding, the milking and working and singing – it was hardly the eucharist or the Mass.

And if the life in the village had been less than human or holy, then there was no mass. If there had been selfishness and forgetfulness and lack of forgiveness...the leaders did decide occasionally...that there would be no eucharist this time.¹³

Priesthood took on a whole new meaning for Donovan too. ‘Approaching an African people like the Masai with a European version of the gospel makes the acceptance of Christianity on their part a very difficult proposition. Continuing the

¹¹ Donovan, p56, 57

¹² Donovan p 92

¹³ Donovan p 127

process with a Western version of the priesthood renders the goal of an adult, indigenous, independent church virtually impossible.’¹⁴

This process that Donovan was observing, was no longer a superior external culture generously bringing civilisation to pagan areas of the globe, but a fresh integration of two cultures. Mbuy-Beya puts it: ‘Colonization in Africa brought Western European civilization and the indigenous civilizations into contact. This encounter meant a culture shock for the Africans, which led to a restructuring of their spirituality. New elements were introduced and old elements modified in order to respond appropriately to the new situation.’¹⁵ ‘The gospel always comes to people in cultural robes’ says David Bosch. ‘There is no such thing as a ‘pure’ gospel, isolated from culture’¹⁶

The whole business of being a missionary in a culture so different from his own had made a profound impact on Donovan. He radically moved his personal position from that of a rather imperial, paternalistic, pedagogical style, to discovering that so much of what at first appeared shallow, or pagan, or uneducated, was actually the ore that contained valuable things that he could learn from too.

The Problem of Defining Terms

Part of the difficulty in exploring this area of spirituality is that of the terminology used. It appears that a number of commentators use a variety of terms that are loosely defined in their own way, and the expressions are not all transferable.

Phrases that are often used include:

¹⁴ Donovan p 150ff

¹⁵ Mbuy-Beya, in African Spirituality: A Cry for Life, p66

- accommodation
- adaptation
- contextualization
- cross-culturalism
- culturization
- enculturation
- indiginization
- inculturation

Bosch, in *Transforming Mission*, makes one of the most thorough attempts of clarification. **Contextualization**, he says, was a term first used in the early 1970s by the Theological Education Fund, and it soon became a blanket term for a variety of theological models; it divides into two sub-groups, including the *indigenisation model*, and the *socio-economic model*. Each of these may be sub-divided: the indigenisation model into either *translation* or *inculturation* types; the socio-economic model into *evolutionary* (political theology and the theology of development) or *revolutionary* (liberation theology, black theology, feminist theology etc).¹⁷

Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was one of the first theologians to see the limitations of the early models of mission. He spotted the cultural bias of the context in which theology evolves. Bosch observes that contextualisation involves the construction of a variety of ‘local theologies’. It suggests the experimental, or contingent nature of all theology, and a resistance to systematic theologies.

Contextual theology arises out of the experiences people are having now, rather than being a matter of timeless truths handed down, observes Newbigin. It is inductive rather than deductive.¹⁸

¹⁶ David Bosch p297

¹⁷ Bosch p 421

¹⁸ Newbigin 1989, p58

Inculturation, according to Bosch, whilst a new term (stemming probably from J. Masson in 1962, *Catholicisme inculturé*), is an old idea. Donovan, through time, came to speak ‘about the necessity of peeling away from the gospel the accretions of the centuries, and of Western, white, European, American culture to get to the kernel of the gospel underneath. This involves separating it from the philosophies and theologies with which we have long identified it – even from good philosophy and good theology.’¹⁹

Bosch points out the ‘kernel’ and ‘husk’ model of the gospel was not a new one. Early versions of the model implied that the western received tradition was the ‘kernel’ of the gospel, and that the local customs in the mission field were the dispensable ‘husk’. In fact Donovan is not using the phrase in this way – nor indeed did early Jesuits such as Nobili and Ricci, and *Propaganda Fide*, advised missionaries not to force people to change their customs as long as they were not opposed to religion or morality. Soon however, the Rites Controversy in India and China meant that a Papal decree condemned this praxis.

Rayan picks up this point ‘Most Asian Churches have been colonially planted, and wear a foreign face. Attempts at inculturation and indigenisation of the Church, made by missionaries with a vision, have been officially scuttled as in the case of the Chinese rites, the Malabar rites and of Upadhyay's moves. Our Churches have been West Asian or West European in liturgy, art, law, and for a good part of their history, in leadership.’²⁰ Newbigin notes that customs which the Franciscan missionaries had

¹⁹ Donovan, p 70

²⁰ Samuel Rayan, S.J. - *A Spirituality Of Mission In An Asian Context* on the SODOS website

condemned as heathen have been accepted by later generations of Indian Christians as harmless.²¹

There is a particularly fine-tuned definition of contextualisation and inculturation in *The Christ we Share*, where Tuesly and Loasby suggest that *contextualisation* is where the missionaries use the ‘context’ of local culture to attract converts to what effectively remains underneath an essentially European gospel. *Inculturation* in their definition is where later on the local Christians produce for their own use images that depict the process of inculturation, where Jesus is truly incarnated into their own culture, and in so being, transforms it into something new and dynamic.²²

It seems though, that for many, these terms are much more interchangeable in use. It is also clear that there is much thinking and writing going on around the world on this area of incarnational spirituality. Inculturation was a style strongly underlined by both Paul VI and John Paul II; and has sprung up in many areas and ways across particularly the Third, or TwoThirds world (even these phrases and their use still seem to be in flux). Much of the work currently being done on contextual theology, culturisation, and inculturation for obvious reasons is being done in Africa, Asia, and South America; there is interest though in Aboriginal, Maori, Inuit, Native American and other cultures within the Western/Northern context too.

Inadequacies in the Contextual Theological Models

Though it is unthinkable to return to spiritualities that do not take account of regional perspectives of God, there are a few dangers that we need to be aware of in

²¹ Newbigin 1989, p 143

these areas of theology. Contextual theology ‘should not lead to an uncritical celebration of an infinite number of contextual and sometimes mutually exclusive theologies’ says Bosch. Sometimes it has a difficulty in embracing the ‘universal, or context-transcending dimensions of theology’, the faith traditions that all Christians share, and should be respected and preserved.²³

If any culture takes on a contextualisation of its own, and then elevates that as of prime importance, it prevents it from being of a broader universal use – as indeed was the context of Western spirituality for a number of centuries. There is also a danger that some of the exponents of contextualisation may sometimes claim a special or privileged knowledge about God’s will, and declare those who disagree as suffering from what Bosch calls a “false consciousness”.²⁴

It is also perhaps sometimes possible to become so involved and engrossed in the whole business of contextualisation, that that in itself becomes the goal, and the original purpose - to understand a different culture from our own, and helping them to better find Christ for themselves - can sometimes get lost.^{iv}

3rd Millennial Images of Christ

Sparked by his own experience in Africa, and wanting to re-apply his experiences within a wider (including his own home) context, Donovan has produced a sort of ‘culturization manifesto’, published towards the end of his book:

- To approach each culture with the respect due to it as the very place wherein resides the possibility of salvation and holiness and grace.
- To approach the people of any culture or nation, not as individuals, but as community.
- To plan to stay not one day longer than is necessary in any one place.

²² The Christ we Share p iii

²³ Bosch p427

²⁴ Bosch p 429

- To give the people nothing, literally *nothing*, but the unchanging, supracultural, uninterpreted gospel before baptism.
- To help them expand that gospel into a creed and a way of life after baptism.
- To enable them to pray as Christians.
- To leave them the Bible towards the day when they can read it and use it as a living letter in their lives.
- To insist that they themselves be their own future missionaries.
- To link them with the outside church in unity, and the outside world in charity and justice.
- To agree with them that baptism is indeed everything; that the reception of baptism is the acceptance of the total responsibility and the full, active sacramental power of the church, the eucharistic community with a mission.
- To encourage them to trust the Spirit given at baptism, and to use the powers and gifts and charisms given to the community by the Spirit.
- And then the final step. The final missionary step as regards the people of any nation or culture, and the most important lesson we will ever teach them – is to leave them.²⁵

Both Bosch and Newbigin speak in terms of having had to update their cultural perspectives over a 10-year period, so one cannot perhaps put too much weight on Donovan's opinions, coming as they do from nearly 25 years ago; and yet he has a number of important principles that still stand the test of time and experience.

One also has to engage with a Western society that has now become so multicultural, and often so secularised, that frequently people in Northern or Western societies are being introduced to the life of the gospel and the faith of Christ for the very first time themselves. Smith-Cameron reminds us of how even the most 'approachable' church has a threshold seemingly 'as high as Everest' for visitors or non-members to cross.²⁶

Others, having dabbled in various Eastern mysticisms, or socio-political activisms, discover a God incarnated into a Middle-Eastern global melting-pot, with a very human touch, and a power to touch people from any and every nation; and it is

²⁵ Donovan p 162, 163

that rather than the Western inherited images that at last communicate to them in a fresh way. Mbuy-Beya speaks specifically of Africa, but perhaps equally powerfully for any society:

The meaning of life in Africa has the possibility of incorporating Christian spirituality...To follow Christ mean's taking up one's cross and walking behind him. For us in Africa, this means that conversion requires breaking away and making new choices, choices that are not simply imposed according to some pre-established, external standard of behaviour. The Word of God has to touch us where we live, to call us to raise out eyes and march towards Him.²⁷

²⁶ Smith-Cameron, p217

²⁷ Mbuy-Beya, in *African Spirituality: A Cry for Life*, p74

(Selected) Glossary from - Van Rheeën, Gailyn;
The Missiology Homepage: Dictionary; <http://www.missiology.org/dictionary.htm>
The small bibliography following relates to the Van Rheeën's own sources.

Acculturation: "the process by which adults acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and behaviors that enable them to become functioning participants of a new host culture" (adapted from *Grunlan and Mayers 1979, 85*). Acculturation is for adults what *enculturation* is for children.

Enculturation: "the process by which children become functioning members of their own society" (*adapted from Gunlan and Mayers 1979, 76*). Compare to the related definition of *Acculturation*.

Contextualization: (1) "the efforts of formulating, presenting and practicing the Christian faith in such a way that is relevant to the cultural context of the target group in terms of conceptualization, expression and application; yet maintaining theological coherence, biblical integrity and theoretical consistency" (*Wan 1999, 13*); (2) "cross-cultural communication of biblical truth that searches for valuable and adequate compartments in other religious and philosophical systems in order to explain biblical truth to the addressees in a specific culture so that they eventually internalize it into their thought system" (*Bachor 1999*).

Cross-Culturalism: "the learned skill of relating to people of other cultures within the contexts of their cultures" (*Van Rheeën 1996b, 105*). Contrast with *Monoculturalism* in this same dictionary.

Culture: "the integrated system of learned patterns of ideas, values, behavior, products, and institutions characteristic of a society" (*Van Rheeën 1996b, 81*).

Indigenous Church: "a native church. . . which shares the life of the country in which it is planted and finds itself ready to govern itself, support itself, and reproduce itself" (*Hodges 1953, 7*); the perspective of Hodges and Smalley that a mature church must not only fulfill the traditional Three-Self Formula but must also be culturally and theologically rooted in the culture in which it finds itself (*Van Rheeën 1996b, 186*).

Monoculturalism: "the assumption that all other people are like us, resulting in the tendency to judge other peoples' actions and attitudes on the basis of our own" (*Van Rheeën 1996b, 97*). Contrast with *cross-culturalism* in this same dictionary.

Three-Self Formula: the theory of church maturation promoted by Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn during the last half of the nineteenth century advocating that "young churches on the mission field would gain their independence on the basis of the principles of *self*-propagation, *self*-support, and *self*-government" (*Van Rheeën, 1996b, 182*).

Van Rheeën's Bibliography:

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- Newbigin**, Lesslie - *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*; SPCK London; 1989
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- Tuesley**, Ann & **Loasby**, Jennie - see **McConnell** above

Resources from the WWW

Contextualisation Project, School of Theology, University of Natal, Rep. of South Africa - <http://www.hs.unp.ac.za/theology/ctxtproj.htm>

Inculturation thread - <http://www.acts.org.za/forum/general/messages/4.html>

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<http://www.fuller.edu/swm/main/kraftinst.html>

Rayan, Samuel, S.J. - *A Spirituality Of Mission In An Asian Context*, on the SODOS website, <http://www.sedos.org/english/ryan2.htm>

Van Rheen, Gailyn; *The Missiology Homepage: Dictionary*,
<http://www.missiology.org/dictionary.htm>

Appendices



For the sake of consistency, all the images and text are taken from *The Christ we Share*. Where there is not enough space for the notes, they continue on the page following the pictures.

The Christ we share – 28 *'Lesser Brethren'* by Margaret Tarrant

This image was one of a number of popular images of Christ known and loved throughout the Anglican world. However they are firmly based in the context of the English countryside, as a closer examination of the 'animals of the world' will confirm!

The Christ we share – 27 Robert Powell –

- *'Jesus of Nazareth'*
A still photograph from the TV movie production originally shown in two parts on Palm Sunday and Easter Day. It can claim no political significance but brought the gospel to a generation of television viewers, some of whom may never have experienced it in any other way.

The Christ we Share – 20

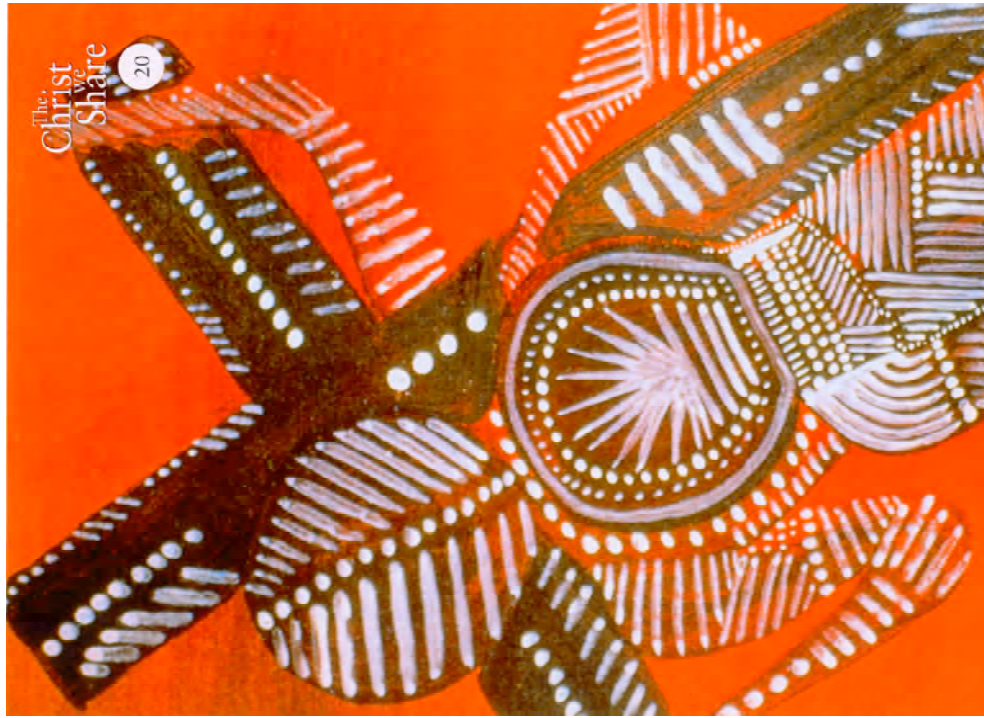
Aboriginal – Road to Calvary

These Stations of the Cross were painted by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, a member of the Daly River Mission Church in the Northern Territory of Australia. It is unusual for an Aboriginal woman to paint, since it is usually the task of men. She explains the symbolism of the stations, beginning with the Third. In Jesus' weakened state the weight of the cross causes him to fall. The patterns on his body show the physical stress he is under. The circles on his head indicate the pain and the sorrow locked up inside him. The patterns on the cross show the increasing weight on his shoulders. In this, the fifth station, when Simon of Cyrene takes hold of the cross, his body merges with that of Jesus, and the pattern on Jesus' head is open. This indicates the transfer of grace to Simon to strengthen him. *'The sun rose inside his head, his mind burst with new belief, he became new man. The resurrection had already begun.'*

The Christ we Share – 24

Christ entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday – China

This photograph is one of a series from Christian art exhibitions at the University of Fu-Jên, Beijing (then Peking), published in 1938 as 'The Life of Christ by Chinese artists' . . . (continued below)



The Christ we Share – 14

Calming the Storm - India

This painting is one of a number produced by an Indian artist, Alfred Thomas, and first published by SPG in 1948. They place Jesus and his followers in Indian settings making use of Indian symbolism interpreted in the light of the Christian faith. Christ is shown as Indian Holy One, an incarnation recognisable to non-Christians, and a focus of devotion for Asian Christians. In this context; although Christ is portrayed as a high-caste Brahmin, his skin is darker than some of his companions, which would link him with lower castes. Despite this the picture reflects the traditional idealism of Indian painting by the spotless, floating white robe which Jesus wears. This robe, billowing in the wind, accentuates Christ at one with the natural elements he controls, so that he cannot be harmed by them. This is the universal gospel, interpreted by India, for India, but speaking to all.



The Christ we Share – 6

The Lion of Judah – The Masai Jesus

The African kinship system is a vast network that connects everyone in a tribe, clan or family, so that family relationships dominate every area of social life. In this context Jesus' incarnation requires that he too be identified through his kinship ties, as shown in the New Testament. There, he is son of the creator God, the elder brother...



The Christ we Share - 15 *He came down – Bali*

Nyoman Darsane is not only an accomplished artist, but also a gifted musician and dancer. His painting of 'The Dancing Christ' was finished in oils in 1978 for the first consultation of the Asian Christian Art Association. It portrays the humility of Christ; coming into human experience and sharing the life of the people. The worshipper prays in an attitude typical of the people of Bali and holds a lotus blossom between her fingers. Images of demons are pushed to the edges of the frame by the light which Jesus brings.

The Christ we Share - 13 *The Golden Bowl - Cameroon*

This image is taken from a series of well-known paintings of the Mafa people of Northern Cameroon. They record a number of 'tableaux' in which villagers enacted biblical scenes based on local settings and artefacts. They were originally commissioned to illustrate gospel readings, Sunday by Sunday, from the Annunciation to Pentecost. They have been compared to 'stained-glass windows' through which the gospel is depicted in an African context. They could also be accused of merely 'dressing up' the inherited Christianity of the colonists 'in African clothes'.

The figure of Christ is taken from the scene of 'The Last Supper', and depicts a number of important contradictions. Although he wears the red robe, the symbol of kingship, Jesus is depicted as the young slave-boy, so often seen waiting on tables in the houses of slave owners. From the context it is all the more significant that this is the moment of sharing the Eucharist, when Jesus offers his body and blood, 'to be a living sacrifice'...

The Christ we Share - 24

Christ entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday – China

This photograph is one of a series from Christian art exhibitions at the University of Fu-Jên, Beijing (then Peking), published in 1938 as 'The Life of Christ by Chinese artists'. ... The originals, commissioned mainly for churches, were painted on silk in traditional Chinese style – lines conveying movement, trees symbolising growth and in the case of the plum tree, strength; impressionistic techniques – and using Chinese ideas. Christ is shown in the context of well-to-do Chinese life (a setting amidst poverty would be irreverent). He and his companions carry a sense of infinite peace. During the civil war between Nationalists and Communists, most Chinese despised Christianity as a 'foreign' religion. Is this a Chinese Christ or a western Christ in a Chinese gown?

The Christ we Share - 6

The Lion of Judah – The Masai Jesus

The African kinship system is a vast network that connects everyone in a tribe, clan or family, so that family relationships dominate every area of social life. In this context Jesus' incarnation requires that he too be identified through his kinship ties, as shown in the New Testament. There, he is son of the creator God, the elder brother ... of all humanity (Rom 8:29) and also elder brother of the ancestors in the 'firstborn of the dead' (Col 1:18). This is particularly important because Jesus is often identified primarily with the ideals and culture of foreign missionaries and colonisers.

This image of the Masai 'elder brother' reflects sentiments expressed in Vincent Donovan's book 'Christianity Rediscovered – an epistle from the Masai'. Donovan describes how his experience of working among the Masai people challenged him to rethink 'mission' in the churches of the North.

In the traditional role, the elder brother defends the younger siblings in their quarrels with other families and acts as a mediator between them and their parents in important matters such as marriage. He bears responsibility for their actions, and may even sacrifice himself on their behalf. We see parallels in the suffering servant figure of Isaiah chapter 53 or the high priest in the letter to the Hebrews.

In the resurrection, Jesus achieved what no other living being has achieved and become elder brother to all the living and 'proto-ancestor'. Jesus transcends tribal and family solidarity and African believers relate through him to all humanity, with whom they receive the life force from the first born of creation.

The images in this picture bring together the Jesus of the North and the South. The Masai Christ of Africa is enthroned in a setting of spheres and squares, with Greek symbols of time and eternity; and surrounded by the traditional emblems of the four evangelists. Black theologians would however also stress the image of Jesus as warrior, an icon of liberation through struggle, and the Black Christ as victor, who has overcome and will do so again. Others, such as Robert Beckford, suggest that this image, with Jesus' genitalia visible beneath his robes, shows himself as a sexually whole black male. He is thus deliberately taking upon himself all the negative stereotypes which this implies.

The Christ we Share - 13 *The Golden Bowl - Cameroon*

This image is taken from a series of well-known paintings of the Mafa people of Northern Cameroon. They record a number of 'tableaux' in which villagers enacted biblical scenes based on local settings and artefacts. They were originally commissioned to illustrate gospel readings, Sunday by Sunday, from the Annunciation to Pentecost. They have been compared to 'stained-glass windows' through which the gospel is depicted in an African context. They could also be accused of merely 'dressing up' the inherited Christianity of the colonists 'in African clothes'.

The figure of Christ is taken from the scene of 'The Last Supper', and depicts a number of important contradictions. Although he wears the red robe, the symbol of kingship, Jesus is depicted as the young slave-boy, so often seen waiting on tables in the houses of slave owners. From the context it is all the more significant that this is the moment of sharing the Eucharist, when Jesus offers his body and blood, 'to be a living sacrifice' ...

... The light reflecting onto the face of Christ, comes from inside the bowl which he offers freely, symbolising the gift of himself. This is in total contrast to the more usual stereotype of the African extending the 'begging-bowl' to the West.

Appendices - Endnotes

ⁱ William **Blake** 1757-1827. English artist, poet, and mystic. Apprenticed to an engraver (1772-79); employed new process of printing from etched copper plates in series of his own lyrical poems, hand-illustrated and coloured, beginning with *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794). Illustrated Mary Wollstonecraft's works (1791) and Young's *Night Thoughts* (1797). Executed and engraved many religious designs, his best *Inventions to the Book of Job* (1820-26); occupied at time of death in engraving designs for Dante's *Divina Commedia*. Author of mystical and metaphysical works including *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793), *America: A Prophecy* (1793), *Europe: A Prophecy* (1794), *Book of Urizen* (1794), *Book of Ahania* (1795), *Book of Los* (1795), and of symbolic poems terminating with *Milton* (1808) and *Jerusalem* (1820); made illustrations for *Bible*, *Paradise Lost*, Blair's *The Grave*, *Pastorals of Virgil*, etc.

ⁱⁱ Whilst working as priest in a parish in New Zealand I was once greeted by a senior local (very English) resident looking around St. Matthias', one of Auckland's oldest churches. He asked if I knew who the lost 12 tribes of Israel *really* were. I responded the people known as the Jews, currently the main residents of Israel today, and their wider network of relatives scattered across the globe. He looked at me in a dismissive fashion, and in hushed conspiratorial tones revealed that this was all a smoke-screen, and truly, at the *Diaspora*, the twelve tribes had migrated to the British Isles, and the British were the *true* tribes of Israel, and he himself a part of it. What was most disconcerting about this encounter was that the man was no simpleton; nor, sadly, was he joking. He could not have meant it more.

ⁱⁱⁱ One tradition was that Jesus himself created the first icon, when he sent the leper King Abgar of Edessa a 'healing image' miraculously produced by pressing a linen cloth on his face. This image 'not made by human hands' became the pattern for all later icons of Christ.

^{iv} Whilst at theological college, a member of our tutor group one day introduced the rest of us to the still relatively new *Christianity Rediscovered* by **Donovan**. He was clearly captivated by the book, and kept referring to pieces, and reading bits out. The conversation went around the room, with individuals picking up points that chimed with them. Then we came to Jeremiah. Suddenly a veil began to lift from our eyes, for although he had always been a part of the group, somehow no one had taken particular note on this occasion – and this quiet, giant, Masai warrior, for that is who he was, now an archdeacon from the Kenyan church on sabbatical with us, drew himself up to his full stature. "Ah, Donovan" he said. "Yes, he never really understood us." The poor student who had introduced the book nearly climbed under his chair in embarrassment. Whilst the anecdote had a particular charm at the time, yet there is still a place for Donovan's book; for even if he had not fully understood Jeremiah's particular village group, what he *had* learned, and how he was able to communicate the way his 'Rediscovery' revolutionised his own understanding of mission, has remained of value.