

The Asian Jesus

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Cover art by the Sri Lankan artist Nalini Marcia Jayasuriya, *Christ from A Time for Singing: Witness of a Life*, page 56 © OMSC publications, New Haven, Connecticut, 2004. Reproduced with permission. “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost” (Luke 15:6).

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Images of Jesus in Christian History

How is it that an Asian Jesus becomes Western? Jesus was born a Jew in Palestine. He was baptized by John the Baptist. He proclaimed the coming of God's rule and called people to accept it. He explained its nature by many parables and spelled out its demands in many discourses. He illustrated and made real God's reign by his many miracles of healing. He announced God's forgiving and self-giving love and demonstrated it by his fellowship with the poor and the outcasts of his day. He was seen as a threat by Jewish authorities, who put him to death with the help of the Roman power. His disciples affirmed that he came to life again, and they went about the then-known world preaching Jesus and the reign of God that he inaugurated, calling people to become his disciples.

Jesus was no ordinary man. People who met him, saw his actions, and heard his preaching were forced to ask: "Who is this man?" Their answer to this question depended on two factors. One was their experience of him: what they saw and heard of what he did and said. The other was the context and culture from which they assessed his significance: "What does he mean to us?" Every one witnessed his miracles and listened to his discourses calling for a change of heart toward God and others. Some saw him as a rabbi who taught with authority principles and perspectives that looked revolutionary. Others saw him as a prophet who announced and realized the coming reign of God. A few even thought that he was the Messiah, whom they were expecting to come and reestablish Israel's kingdom. People like Herod saw him only as a miracle worker, though, for a moment, he was afraid that he might be another John the Baptist who would also condemn Herod's misdeeds. The Jewish leaders saw him as a pretender with a certain influence among the people, threatening and challenging their own power. His disrespect for the sabbath and his cleansing of the Temple upset them. Pilate mocked him as the "king of the Jews," whom he could crucify. Here we have different images of Jesus. Their sources are in the historico-cultural tradition of the Jews. The choice of a particular image depends on how a person or group relates to Jesus, their attitudes and perspectives.

The disciples, who followed and lived with Jesus, heard his teachings, and saw his miracles of healing and exorcism, thought that he was the Messiah whom they were expecting. The question that John the Baptist put to him through his disciples may be seen as paradigmatic:

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” (Matt 11:2–5)

With a reference to the prophet Isaiah, the answer of Jesus seems positive. He goes to the same text when he proclaims his identity in the synagogue at Nazareth. He reads:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring the good news to
the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Lk 4:18–19)

Then he announces: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21). We hear the same expectation from the disciples who were proceeding to Emmaus after the death of Jesus. They told Jesus himself, who was walking with them, unrecognized by them:

“The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said: but they did not see him.” Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then

enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. (Lk 24:19–27)

Finally, when Jesus was with all the disciples together,

they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:6–11)

Jesus Descending and Ascending

These texts provide us a background to understand how the early Christians arrive at their image of Jesus as Lord. The disciples had seen him as a prophet and the Messiah. He announced the reign of God and inaugurated it by his miracles of forgiveness and healing. They saw him arrested by the Jewish leaders and delivered into the hands of the Romans to be killed as a false messiah. But God justified him by raising him up to life again. The reign of God that Jesus proclaimed, however, had not fully come before Jesus was taken up to heaven. But what they had experienced assured them that Jesus was now with the Father and would come again to achieve God's reign on earth. Stephen declares before the Jewish leaders: "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" (Acts 7:56).

We need not speculate here on the process through which their experience of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus coalesces into a composite image. But we see it in an early Christian hymn that Paul quotes in his letter to the Philippians:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God
did not regard equality with God as something to be
exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death—
 even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
 and gave him the name that is above every name,
 so that at the name of Jesus
 every knee should bend,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 and every tongue should confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:5–11)

This hymn has many parallels. The image it conveys is that of a divine being who descends to the earth, becomes human, suffers, dies, but is raised up again and becomes Lord. Jesus is Lord. He becomes incarnate and suffers and dies through obedience to the Father's will. He is reestablished as Lord through his resurrection. There is a process of descent and ascent that is part of the history of the human world. It has therefore a double aspect: what happens to him and what happens to the world. As far as the world is concerned, this process is not complete. The reign of God has not been fully established. So the Lord will come again to achieve it. As Paul says: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 2:16). This day of Jesus Christ is obviously in the future. That is why the people continue to pray: "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rv 22:20). The image is not that of a human being who is made divine by God. Rather, Jesus is a divine being who takes on humanity and demonstrates his identity by his perfect obedience.

Jesus Is Lord

The early Christians experience and confess Jesus Christ as divine-human Lord. Jesus is Lord! They worship him. They pray to him. The gospels evoke the life and work of Jesus precisely to justify this faith vision. As John says toward the end of his gospel: "These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:31).

"Jesus is Lord!" This is the dominant image of the early church. But in trying to justify it the gospels evoke other images. These are specified by the historical, cultural, and theological contexts from which they were written.

Jesus in the Gospels

Mark starts with the affirmation that Jesus Christ is the “Son of God” (Mk 1:1). A heavenly voice confirms this when Jesus receives baptism at the hand of John the Baptist: “You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mk 1:11). But Mark seems to build his narrative around the idea of the messianic secret. Though Jesus expels evil spirits and heals people, he warns the beneficiaries not to speak about it. Though his life and actions, proclaiming the reign of God and calling for conversion, do raise questions about him, people in general do not recognize his messianic identity. Jesus reveals it only before the high priest (Mk 14:61–62) and is killed. His claim is justified by his resurrection.

For Matthew, Jesus is indeed the Messiah, who brings the new law fulfilling the old (Mt 5:17). He is a rabbi who teaches with authority. “You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you” (Mt 5:21–22). He uses parables and discourses to convey his teaching. He preaches the new law of love from the heart—loving others, even our enemies (Mt 5:38–48), seeing himself in them, especially in the poor (Mt 25:31–46). He makes disciples and sends them everywhere to make other disciples (Mt 28:18–20). Matthew’s audience seems to be primarily Jewish communities. He is trying to make them understand that Jesus is not the kind of messiah whom they were expecting. He is a messiah who is destined to suffer and to be killed.

Luke seems to be writing primarily to non-Jewish communities. He presents Jesus as the great reconciler and healer. He witnesses to the forgiving and reconciling love of God. His mission is set in the context of the jubilee, when all debts should be forgiven and all property restored to their original owners, so that the community starts anew (cf. Lv 25 and Dt 15). He brings good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and freedom to the captives (Lk 4:18–19). He also proclaims forgiveness to sinners. He speaks of the prodigal father who receives back his wayward son with unconditional love and of the good shepherd who goes after the lost sheep (Lk 15). Luke narrates the story of Zacchaeus, a tax collector who is converted (Lk 19:1–10).

John sees Jesus as the Word of God become flesh (Jn 1:1–14). The biblical “Word” indicates not merely revelation but also action. John’s image of the Word may also depend on the biblical image of Wisdom, which is closely related to God and yet personified as a divine being in the Old Testament.

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

When there were no depths I was brought forth,
 when there were no springs abounding with water.
 Before the mountains had been shaped,
 before the hills, I was brought forth—
 when he had not yet made earth and fields,
 or the world's first bits of soil.
 When he established the heavens, I was there,
 when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
 when he made firm the skies above,
 when he established the fountains of the deep,
 when he assigned to the sea its limit,
 so that the waters might not transgress his command,
 when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
 then I was beside him, like a master worker;
 and I was daily his delight,
 rejoicing before him always,
 rejoicing in his inhabited world
 and delighting in the human race. (Prv 8:22–31)

This makes it easy for John to personify the Word as God's self-manifestation. God's self-manifestation in Jesus encounters the refusal of the Jews. John lays much stress on this confrontation. At the same time, the divinity of the Word is highlighted by the "I am" sayings: "I am the bread of life" (Jn 6:35); "I am the light of the world" (Jn 8:12); "Before Abraham was, I am" (Jn 8:58); "I am the good shepherd" (Jn 10:11); "I am the resurrection and the life" (Jn 11:25); and "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6). The Word, however, becomes flesh and therefore really human. This makes it possible for Jesus to raise humanity to divine status. Here we see the descending and ascending paradigm. Participation in divine life leads to communion with God and with others, shown in love and self-giving service (Jn 17). The vine and the branches become the symbol of this communion (Jn 15:1–13). The Spirit is given to sustain and strengthen this communion (Jn 14:15–17). Forgiveness is a dimension of this communion. After his resurrection Jesus appeared to his apostles and he "breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them'" (Jn 20:22–23).

All the gospels give great importance to the suffering and death of Jesus. They refer back to the image of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah (Is 52:13–53:12). Jesus suffers for us. The exact nature of the "for us," however, is not specified. It could be exemplary, inspirational, covenantal, and manifest solidarity and self-gift—everything except expiation and substitution. Total self-gift and surrender seem to be conditions for total acceptance

and communion. There is no Jesus without the cross. This is the reason that Paul finds glory in the crucified Jesus (Gal 6:14).

Jesus as the High Priest

But the image of lord pushes all other images to the background. Even the passion is seen as a necessary passage to the Lord's glorification. During the persecutions this necessity is experienced also at a personal level as a participation in the Lord's sufferings. What dominates, however, is the lordship of Christ. The letter to the Hebrews is representative of this image:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. (Heb 1:1–4)

This image of glory is complemented by the image of his humanity:

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb 4:14–16)

This image of the glorious Christ will be perpetuated, not only in popular devotion, but also in the image of Christ, the Lord of all—*Pantocrator*—that can be seen above the main entrance to many early cathedrals. The liturgy of the Eastern church is also centered on the mystery of Christ the high priest interceding for us in heaven. It is this mystery that we celebrate and in which we participate.

The Jesus of Theological Reflection

The first councils of the church affirm that their belief in Jesus Christ as divine Lord is not against the biblical affirmation: "I am the LORD your God

. . . You shall have no other gods before me” (Dt 5:6). The Council of Nicea (325) affirms belief

in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten generated from the Father, that is, from the being (*ousia*) of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in being (*homoousios*) with the Father, through whom all things were made, those in heaven and those on earth. For us human beings and for our salvation he came down, and became flesh, was made man, suffered and rose again on the third day. He ascended to the heavens and shall come again to judge the living and the dead.

The Council of Chalcedon (451), on the other hand, confesses

one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man composed of rational soul and body, the same one in being (*homoousios*) with the Father as to the divinity and one in being with us as to the humanity, like unto us in all things but sin (cf. Heb 4:15) . . . in two natures, without confusion or change, without division or separation.

The councils affirm that Jesus Christ is both divine and human. They use some technical terminology. They do not explain the mystery. They lay down the boundaries of the language that speaks about it. They oppose both affirmations that emphasize one-sidedly the divinity or humanity of Jesus and statements that seek to subordinate Jesus to the Father. But these statements are very different from inspiring symbols and images.

Jesus, the King of Kings

In the Western church the image of Christ the Lord takes the form of the King of kings. After the conversion of Emperor Constantine, the whole empire becomes Christian—at least sociologically—and Christ is enthroned as the King of kings. This image continues to hold sway to this day. In the beginning the emperor is seen as his delegate on earth, ruling by his authority. He is seen not only as the head of the political kingdom but also of the church. The emperors called and presided over some of the early ecumenical councils. When the empire collapses, the pope succeeds to this role, enjoying sacred and secular authority, specified as the two swords of power. The pope consecrates and deposes kings. At the time of colonial expansion he can even divide the New World between Spanish and Portuguese spheres of influence. The liberation of science, philosophy, and political power from

papal authority in Europe is the result of a long struggle—one of the reasons for the anti-clericalism and secularization in Europe. The colonial masters claimed the power to impose Christianity on people of other religions, even with military might when and where necessary. Scriptural justification for this practice was found in the phrase “Compel people to come in” (Lk 14:23), which Jesus puts in the mouth of the host in his parable of the Great Dinner (cf. Luke 14:12–24). The pope will continue to claim a certain universal authority in the spiritual realm as the vicar of Christ. Even today it is affirmed that everyone who is saved is related in some mysterious way to the church, whose visible head is the pope. The church still celebrates the feast of Christ the King. Images of Jesus with a golden crown are common. In popular religiosity even the child Jesus is seen with a crown.

Jesus on the Cross

In the early church, both in the East and in the West, people did not concentrate much on the passion of Jesus, though it is the centerpiece in all the gospels. Jesus instructs his disciples both before and after his death-resurrection that his way to glory passes through suffering. We have seen the path of descent and ascent in the hymns of the early church. Paul told the Corinthians: “When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words of wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:1–2). The Eastern church thought of salvation as participation in the divine life that Jesus, who comes down from heaven, shares with us. That was also the reason why it defended the divinity and humanity of Christ in the early councils. Because Jesus is really human, he can be one of us. But because he is also really divine, he can make us all divine, sharers of the divine life. The Western church, however, thought of salvation in more juridical terms. Whatever its theological explanation, the focus was on the fact that Jesus has saved us by suffering and dying for us. The sufferings of Jesus then become the manifestation of God’s love for us. As Paul had said: “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Images of the suffering Christ on the cross therefore became common in Europe. Devotions like the Way of the Cross became popular. To the images of the suffering Jesus were later added the image of the Sacred Heart. There is still a reference to suffering here, since the heart of Jesus is pierced. But the main image of the heart symbolizes love. The juridical attitude to the sufferings of Jesus is kept alive by the insistence on reparation. The image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus as an object of devotion is so common in places like India that when members of other religions seek to represent Jesus they seem to choose it spontaneously. The eucharistic body

of Christ also becomes a common means of encountering Christ. The focus is on the presence of Jesus with us, though it also relates to his sacrificial self-offering. A common element underlying all these symbols seems to be a vertical relationship to Jesus, who is the king, who died for us, who loves and suffers for us, who is present to us in the form of bread. The attitude is one of adoration.

This attitude, however, changes in contemporary liberation movements. Jesus opts for the poor and struggles with them for their liberation. He is prophetically critical of the religious and political leaders of the time. They choose to do away with him. Jesus takes on the sufferings imposed on him in solidarity with the poor. Both the fact that, in Jesus, God suffers in solidarity with the suffering poor and the fact that, in the resurrection of Jesus, the good finally wins over the evil, are sources of strength and hope for the suffering poor. They assure us that God is with us, even if total liberation may be eschatological.

Jesus as the Word

The attention of the Reformers in the sixteenth century is on Jesus the Word. Jesus is the revealer. His revelation demands on our part the response of faith. This faith is justifying or salvific. Jesus as the Word of God challenges and judges us. He also saves us. But I have the impression that the focus of the reformed Christians moves slowly from Jesus the Word of God to the Bible as the written word of God. Reading the word and listening to it become important. Attempts are made to spread the word through the media. A certain automatic efficacy is even attributed to it. The life of Jesus or the New Testament slowly yields its place to the whole Bible. God and God's word overshadow Jesus. In the more recent Pentecostal groups the Spirit of God seems to replace Jesus as the center of attention, though sometimes we may not see a clear distinction between the Lord Jesus and the Spirit.

Jesus, the Liberator

In the latter part of the twentieth century Jesus was seen as the liberator, especially by the poor and oppressed Christians of Latin America, Africa, and Asia. When Jesus is seen as Lord, the focus is on the risen and glorified Jesus. Less attention is paid to the life, passion, and death of Jesus. The image of Jesus as liberator seeks to restore the balance. The poor look more closely at the life of Jesus and see that he actually preached good news to the poor. In a society that was divided between the rich and powerful elite and the poor and oppressed people, Jesus is critical of the self-sufficient rich and speaks and acts in solidarity with the poor. While he does not promote

a revolutionary movement, he does not shy away from the political sphere in his opposition to the oppressors. He practices table fellowship with the poor and the oppressed. His miracles address their needs, at least symbolically. He does not hesitate to suffer and die when the powerful leaders decide to remove him from the scene. His suffering and death can be seen as gestures of protest on behalf of the poor. The reign of God that he proclaims and delineates in his teaching provides the framework for a new society of freedom, fellowship, and justice. In Jesus, therefore, the poor see God with them, struggling with them and dying with them. The resurrection of Jesus then becomes an assurance of liberation, even if this liberation remains an object of eschatological hope. But the transformation that Jesus seeks to bring is not merely for the next world. It becomes actively present already in history wherever people love one another, share their goods, and serve others even unto death. Through his disciples Jesus launches a social movement of liberation in history. They keep struggling for this liberation in collaboration with all people of good will.

A Hindu-Christian Jesus

Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya (1861–1907) called himself a Hindu-Christian: Hindu with regard to culture and Christian with regard to religion. He used the term *Saccidananda* (*Sat* [truth] + *Cit* [consciousness] + *Ananda* [bliss]) to refer to the Trinity. He strongly affirmed the divinity of Jesus by identifying him with *Cit*. He expressed his faith in Jesus in a hymn.

The transcendent Image of Brahman,
 Blossomed and mirrored in the full-to-overflowing
 Eternal Intelligence—
 Victory to God, the God-Man.

Child of the pure Virgin,
 Guide of the Universe, infinite in being
 Yet beauteous with relations,
 Victory to God, the God-Man.

Ornament of the Assembly
 Of saints and sages, Destroyer of fear,
 Chastiser of the Spirit of Evil—
 Victory to God, the God-Man.

Dispeller of weakness
 Of soul and body, pouring out life for others,

Whose deeds are holy,
Victory to God, the God-Man.

Priest and Offerer of his own soul in agony,
Whose life is Sacrifice,
Destroyer of sin's poison,—
Victory to God, the God-Man.

Tender, beloved, soother of the human heart,
Ointment of the eyes,
Vanquisher of fierce death,—
Victory to God, the God-Man.¹

The hymn has to be heard in the original Sanskrit to catch all the allusions to Indian religious tradition and the resonance of Indian terminology like *Cit*, *Hari*, *Brahman*, *Saguna*, *Nirguna*, *Nara-Hari*, and so on. It is a litany of evocative symbols and attributes that at the same time make a theological point. It is the fruit of dialogue between two philosophical traditions but in deep and conscious fidelity to a single tradition of faith.

I have given a very rapid survey of some of the different images or names that Jesus has had through Christian history. This shows that the believers were not satisfied with a repetition of the dogmas of Nicea and Chalcedon to understand and live the significance of Christ in their lives.