

# COMMON DREAMS

BRISBANE

SEPTEMBER 2016

## CONFERENCE PAPER



*Margaret Mayman*

**PANEL PRESENTATION**

**“Three Reflections on Spirituality”**

*Jesus Is Not My Boyfriend: A  
Spirituality of Christa/Community*

**Jesus is not my boyfriend:  
reimagining a spirituality of Christa/community**

**Rev Margaret Mayman, PhD**

*I acknowledge the Turrbul and Jagera peoples, traditional custodians of this sacred land and give thanks for their care of the earth and water and living things since the dreamtime.*

*I speak today as a Christian but I acknowledge people of diverse faiths who are present at Common Dreams and value the wisdom of their paths.*

Progressive theology resources us to rethink tradition. It deconstructs inherited faith, empowering people to see meaning beyond the myths.

It is also engaged in reconstruction and re-imagination, searching for a spirituality that is life-giving and transformative: that nourishes and inspires us to live out our faith in ways that are just and compassionate.

Progressive Christianity is intellectually exciting but is it spiritually enriching? The numbers of people who attend Pentecostal churches suggest that many people, given the choice between intellectual engagement and an emotional high, will go for the latter.

The theology of such churches is communicated in their music and an emphasis on a "personal relationship with Jesus." This genre of Christian music includes what I call "love songs to Jesus" or "Jesus is my boyfriend" music.

Problematic songs include several that are surprisingly rather popular in the Uniting Church... (Audio)

*Lord, I give You my heart  
I give You my soul, I live for You alone  
Every breath that I take, every moment I'm awake  
Lord, have Your way in me...*

It portrays a personal, quasi erotic, relationship with Jesus...

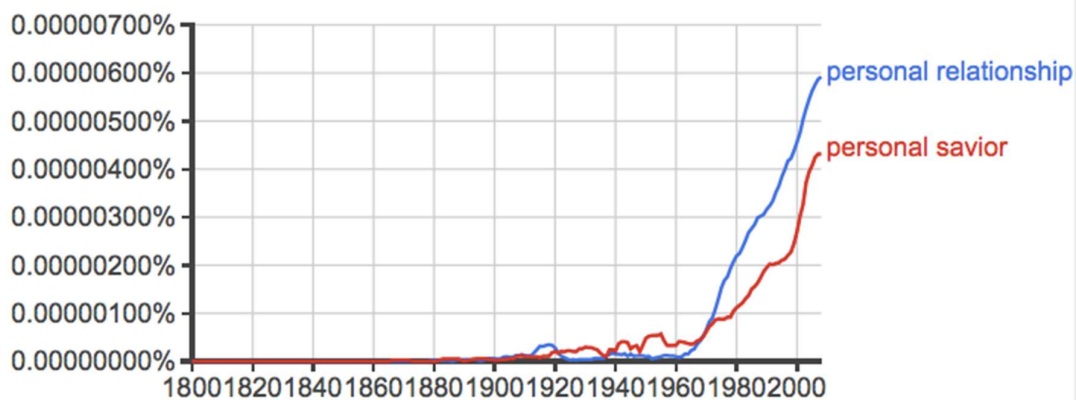
Another example is Hillsong favourite "Shout to the Lord" which starts with the words My Jesus, My Saviour– (Audio)

*My Jesus, my Saviour,  
Lord, there is none like You;  
All of my days  
I want to praise  
The wonders of Your mighty love.*

These songs are emotionally engaging and musically catchy, and as much as it concerns me, they do seem to meet the spiritual yearning of vast numbers of people who identify as Christian, many of whom are much younger than the majority of us gathered here.

And it does concern me because the theology is ethically deficient, focused on the self, and on individual salvation, in which the Christian life is akin to an adoring relationship with a celestial rock star.

Blogger Joel Miller did a Google Books Ngram to chart the frequency of the phrases “personal savior” and “personal relationship with Jesus.” The phrases barely register before the 1970s, at which point they took off like pair of rockets, coinciding with the rise of the me generation and anticipating “Jesus is my boyfriend” music.



Instead of a personal relationship with Jesus, I believe we need a social relationship with the Way of Jesus. For some of us it will be social through church, others will seek diverse forms of spiritual community.

We need community. Jesus is not my boyfriend, because I am searching for spiritual resources that will enable me to live and love this earth, its creatures and life forms.

And what about progressives?

Though we might not sing love songs to Jesus, our relationship to spirituality is often similarly individualistic. We read, and when we gather it is to listen and talk... and not necessarily to act to change the world for justice and peace.

How can we seek an ecclesial/social relationship with Jesus? Or with the Way that Jesus is incarnated/christed in our world – in unexpected people and surprising places?

There are many paths which we could take seeking new spiritual directions.

A key focus of progressive theology has been to distinguish between the Jesus of history and the Christ of Faith. John Bell described this as “taking Jesus out of the manger, down from the Cross, and off the Throne of heaven.”<sup>1</sup>

Scholars, like Marcus Borg empowered and enlivened Christian people to discover the Jesus that he called “a God intoxicated prophet.”<sup>2</sup> Not Jesus the boyfriend-saviour, but Jesus the mystic, sage and prophet of justice for the poor and the marginalised.

Despite this progress, even among progressives the word ‘Christ’ still usually refers exclusively to Jesus’ existence after his death, and after whatever happened among the disciples that led them to proclaim that he is risen.

For many progressive Christians, particularly those of us who choose to spend time in churches, we still need to deal with Christ. And we need resurrection to be more than something we don’t believe in anymore.

I am aware that talk of resurrection can make some progressive people wary. I want to be clear what I mean.

Jürgen Moltmann wrote: “Resurrection is not a consoling opium, soothing us with the promise of a better world in the hereafter. It is the energy for a rebirth of this life. This hope doesn’t point to another world. It is focused on the redemption of this one.”<sup>3</sup>

Today I want to grasp the freedom of progressive spirituality to reimagine Christ as Christa/Community and in doing so to name the liberation of women and queers, outsiders and refugees, indigenous peoples and the earth itself, as part of the work of resurrection.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bell, John. *Ten Things They Never Told Me About Jesus: A Beginners Guide to a Larger Christ*. (Glasgow, United Kingdom: Wild Goose Publications, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Borg, Marcus. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. (HarperOne, 1995)

<sup>3</sup> Moltmann, Jürgen. *Jesus Christ for Today’s World*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishing, 1995), p. 81.

In my first year as a graduate student at Union Seminary in New York, all hell broke loose at the nearby Anglican Cathedral of St John the Divine. On display, in Holy Week, was Edwina Sandys statue *Christa*. Such was the controversy it was removed before Easter.

Some saw it as heretical, too distant from the male body of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Others saw it as too sexual. Some women appreciated it as an act of solidarity with women's suffering, empowering and enabling resistance.



The sculpture 'Crucified Woman' by Almut Lutkenhouse, displayed at a church in Toronto at Easter 1979 caused similar controversy. It is now located at Emmanuel College. After the Montreal massacre in 1989, in which a gunman killed fourteen women, hundreds gathered around the Crucified Woman to remember the victims and God's solidarity with them.



These artworks, and others like them, represent an important theological impulse: to see in Jesus a person who impacts human community in ways that are not limited by gender. They challenge us to ask if Jesus' maleness is an essential aspect of his being as a bearer of the Sacred and a pioneer of the Way.

But *Christa* crucified, cannot be the end of the story. Nicola Slee has asked: "Where is the risen *Christa*?"

"Is it possible to claim that while Jesus died as a Palestinian, Jewish man, Christ rises to be "God with us" in many different forms – including the *Christa*?"<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Slee, Nicola. *Seeking the Risen Christa*. (S.P.C.K. Publishing, 2011)

Can we stop seeing Christ/Christa as only male? Can we see Christ/Christa as female? Can we see Christ/Christa as embodied in communities of solidarity and resistance?



One of the most evocative Easter stories is the encounter of two disciples, one male and the other unnamed and therefore likely female, with a stranger on the road to Emmaus. In an act of hospitality, they offer shelter and food, and in the moment when bread is broken, their hearts are opened, and they experience resurrection.

Can you imagine that when the Risen One was made known to the two disciples they encountered not a male Christ, but God made known to them in female form.

Such an encounter has been represented in several paintings by Filipino artist Emmanuel Garibay. The disciples roar with laughter, slapping their foreheads in amazement, in a recognition of their previous blindness. Surely she was there all along: the unexpected source of our liberation.

A Filipina working woman, here in a red dress, drinking in a bar, only the wounds in her hands identifying her as Christ...

Garibay's work nourishes my spiritual journey and comes into conversation with the work of many feminist theologians who have also reimagined Christa.



Feminist theology is part of the larger project of liberation theology which points to the many ways that religion is oppressive, and yet, at the same time, offers hope of renewing religion by the process of bringing back into the mainstream that which has been denied, marginalized and repressed. It enables healing of the splits which have fractured the Christian tradition. Its goal is not simply to critique but to re-enliven.

Feminist theologians have been talking about Jesus and about claims about Christ for decades. They have asked “can a male saviour save women?” And wondered if Jesus subverts or reinforces male dominance.

Feminists were early critics of violent atonement theory which said that God required Jesus' death as a sacrifice to pay for human sin.

Feminists have explored the reign of God in terms of its vision of gender equality (and all the intersections of gender with race, class, sexual orientation, etc.) and paid attention to Jesus' practice of sharing an open table with people who were regarded as marginal and outcast by religious and political elites.

Rosemary Ruether wrote; “We can encounter Christ in the form of our sister. Christ, the liberated humanity, is not confined to a static perfection of one person two thousand years ago.”<sup>5</sup>



Carter Heyward names the Jesus of history – ‘a Jewish male with a particular relationship to God.’ Christ, she says, may be for Christians the saving implications of the Jesus story, or the characterization of justice-making with compassion, courage, and integrity.<sup>6</sup>

This is a much less individual understanding of the Risen Christ, and yet nevertheless a legitimate theological interpretation. St Paul's notion of the Church as the ‘body of Christ’ suggests that the risen Christ is no longer to be identified with the historical Jesus but is to be encountered in the company of the emergent Christian community.

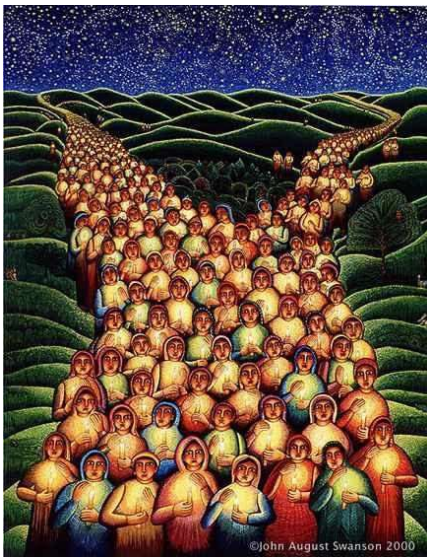
It is as orthodox as St Teresa of Avila claiming: “Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks compassion to the world.”

---

<sup>5</sup> Ruether, Rosemary Radford, *Sexism and God Talk*. (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 138.

<sup>6</sup> Heyward, Carter, *Speaking of Christ: A Lesbian Feminist Voice* (New York: Pilgrim Press), pp. 21-22.

Rita Nakashima Brock argues that feminist Christology must not be centred in the historic figure of Jesus, however much it may draw on the inspiration and teachings of Jesus, because that is to make of one male individual, a heroic saviour figure to whom women look for meaning and guidance. She claimed it leads to an unhealthy idolization of Jesus that disempowers women and prevents us from claiming our own spiritual authority.<sup>7</sup>



Nakashima Brock speaks not of Christa as a female risen one, but of Christa/Community. The Risen One who lives now in the community that bears the dangerous memory not just of Jesus but of his female and male friends.

I hope that the expansiveness of reimagining Christa will move us beyond traditional piety that sees the risen Christ as a perfected Jesus to whom we relate as personal friend or lover.

I hope reimagining Christa will remind us that we are called to embody Christa/community, to locate together resources for struggle and liberation.

Liberation for everyone, male and female, trans and intersex and bi, queer and straight, able-bodied and differently abled, black and white, rich and poor: -

Christa risen in us all...

---

<sup>7</sup> Brock, Rita Nakashima. *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), p. 113



### **Connect with Margaret Mayman and Pitt Street Uniting Church**

- [www.pittstreetuniting.org.au](http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au)
- Sunday reflections at Pitt Street [bit.ly/PittStreetYouTube](http://bit.ly/PittStreetYouTube)
- <https://www.facebook.com/pittstreetunitingchurch/>
- <https://www.facebook.com/AustralianChristiansforMarriageEquality/>
- <https://twitter.com/mmayman>