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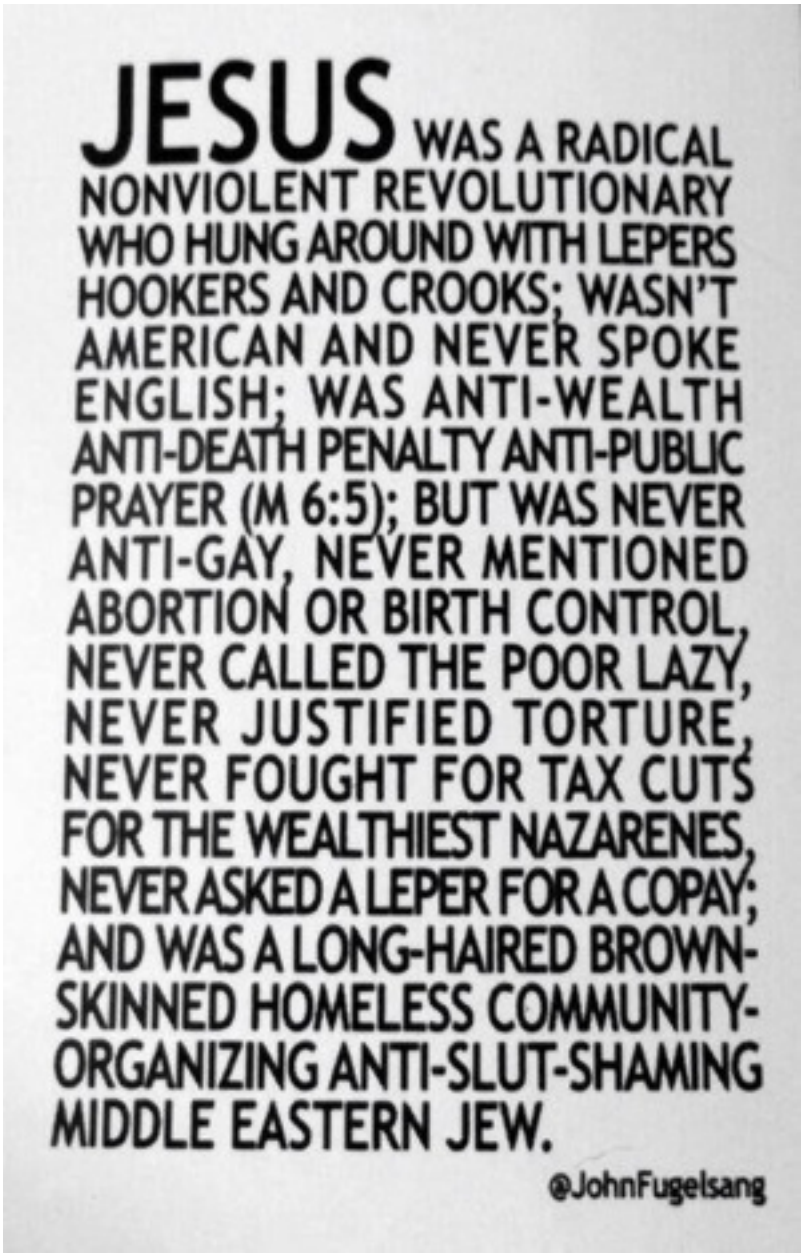
The Rebel Jesus:

A Christology in Music



The format and style of this paper requires some explanation. My initial approach was to go through *Christ and Reconciliation*[1] and argue point by point why excluding each heresy was destructive to the mission and vision of Jesus Christ, and how for me, Christology must open as many doors to as many people as possible while spreading a message of love. Telling people that their vision of Jesus is wrong, if it is not actually harmful to others, is wrong. Jesus himself refuses to define his existence, asking instead, "But who do you say that I am?" And when Simon responds, Jesus proclaims that it is not other humans who define him, either, but rather revelation from God.[2] The most constructive, positive Christology is one that allows the believer to best hear the lures from God towards greater Harmony, and to relate to the story of Jesus Christ in a way that leads one to a life of service and devotion. In his introduction to Process, Bruce Epperly says that after experiencing "the crumbling of Newtonian physics," Alfred North Whitehead never trusted "any attempt at dogmatic certainty whether in science of religion" for the rest of his life.[3] Restricting Christology to only one model in Christian dogma is a form of what Epperly calls the "abstractions that can be both oppressive and irrelevant to flesh and blood human beings."[4] While for me, Jesus Christ is most accessible as a human being, I have no interest in telling others that they cannot see Christ in the way that is most accessible to them, as long as it does not interfere with the full blooming of another's Christology or connection to the Divine.

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[1] Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christ and Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William D. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013).

[2] Mt 16:15-17 (NRSV).

[3] Bruce Epperly, *Process Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011) Kindle loc 168.

[4] Epperly Kindle loc 63.

It also occurred to me that a paper breaking down all the traditional heretical Christologies would be inherently negative, and would be all about other people's Christology and not my own. I guide Unitarian Universalist 8th graders through a year of spiritual formation that ends in a statement of faith in front of the congregation, whatever that statement may be; the only condition we give them is that it must take a positive form, not a negative form. If I wrote a paper on my Christology that was entirely about other people's beliefs, I would be a hypocrite betraying not only my faith, but the youth who trust me to help them in their journey. I spend most of my time in class listening to Christians talk about various theologians and their ideas on Christology, and I offer up my thoughts on the presented models, but I rarely speak about my own model or how it was formed outside of the traditional Christian milieu. I realized this paper was a unique opportunity to demonstrate how a particular environment other than a church can still influence and shape theological ideas, even ones that appear to be specific to Christian communities bound together by things like catechisms or the Book of Discipline. The tradition I grew up in was the Jesus Christ, and the Christianity, of bluegrass, country, and americana music.

My relationship with Jesus Christ began in the womb; when my parents found out I was on the way they went into the recording studio and made three albums at the same time, in order to have them already done to give to the record company for the first few years after I was born in order to spend more time with me. One of those three albums was *Roses in the Snow*, and while many of the bluegrass songs included are Christian in nature, "Jordan"[5] is most relevant to my Christology. As a Process theologian, I have no doubt that all the singing and music I experienced while in utero had a definitive effect on my personal pattern of occasions, especially

[5] Emmylou Harris, "Jordan," on *Roses in the Snow* (Warner Brothers Records, 1980) iTunes edition.

during the recording process, during which I would have heard each song several times over and over again within the same time span. “Jordan” is a traditional Christian song for four parts, and while the title references crossing the River Jordan, the subject of the song is actually Jesus and how one should relate to him. Now, while the language is decidedly Christian—it refers not only to Jesus but also to a “day of judgement” and the Lord “descending in glory from on high”—Jesus is described as a “true companion” and an example to follow in one’s present day life in order to have a happy ending after death. And while the singers declare that “without Him, you never will make it o’er” the Jordan River, the song also does not preclude one from bringing other true companions along, whether that might be Buddha or Ganesh. I often struggle with the fact that throughout my life, I have over and over again tried to be a member of a Christian denomination and failed, but I could never abandon Jesus as true companion. I spend much of my time among Atheists, Wiccans, etc, defending what I see as the message of Jesus that is in keeping with the manifestation of Beauty and Harmony in the universe for all people, not just Christians—although for most of my life I did not have Process words for it.

While “Jordan” is where my relationship with Jesus started (in the primordial vision of gestation), no Christology is complete without an examination of Jesus’s own pattern of formation, which must always include Judaism. The next song on the playlist is “Noah’s Ark,”[6] by Jeff Black, and it’s a extraordinary midrash that speaks not only to the Hebrews’ experience as a tribe of people who are not only survivors of one disaster after another, but also who are allowed to question and reshape their faith and their relationship with their God depending on the circumstances. The best foundations are those that can shift when the ground inevitably shifts. A

[6] Jeff Black, “Noah’s Ark,” on *Birmingham Road* (Arista Records, 1998).

foundation that is too rigid will crack, and the building which stands upon it will fall. Jesus's Judaism demanded that he be willing to question authorities he found corrupt, and to find unconventional ways to bring a new tribe together to metaphorical flood he saw coming. In so many of the speeches he gave, not only to the people but to his disciples directly, I also hear the words that Jeff puts into Noah's mouth: "You all hold on to one another, and you make damn sure that you don't drift apart. Then we'll truck on down this mountain, and we'll find a level place to make a brand new start." Like the image of meeting Jesus the savior after crossing the River Jordan, I imagine Jesus waiting with open arms to meet us every time we finally turn back towards his vision of an inclusive, loving world, singing "Hello, it's good to see you; it's been a long, long time." Like the story of the prodigal son, this Jesus, and the God he represents, welcomes our questions, our doubts, and our presences, whenever and wherever we show up.

While I have learned to appreciate Easter more as I grow older, I have always found Christmas, and Jesus's birth, to be more meaningful and pertinent to my life than his resurrection (much to Dr. Jack Jackson's chagrin). I am one of those people that listens to Christmas carols year round; my "Holiday" smart playlist in iTunes has 1330 songs and has a running time of three straight days. I add to it every year. In our house, we celebrate both the Winter Solstice as a Wiccan holiday and Christmas as the birthday of baby Jesus. "The Little Drummer Boy,"[7] a song covered by more artists than I can count, was an essential part of my Christology formation. While I love all the songs about the magi and the star and the wonders of that night, it is this song that actually speaks to my religious identity and relationship with Jesus. In the midst of all the prophecy, pomp, and circumstance created by the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, "The Little

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[7] The Temptations, "The Little Drummer Boy," on *A Motown Christmas* (Motown Records, 1973).

Drummer Boy" reminds us that every single person on earth has something to offer—in the terms of the Unitarian Universalist seven principles, every person has inherent worth and dignity which we are called to recognize, and if needed, attempt to bring forth into the world. The song also does not discount the contributions of the privileged, either—their gifts are accepted, and they even invite the boy to come celebrate with them. He is included, and it is his own perception that leads him to think he has nothing to offer the holy baby. The song also reminds me of how we should always be reminded that those who are most dependent on others, either through poverty or through age or disability, often have the best lessons to teach us about how to interact with and treat others around us. Baby Jesus here, who has not yet grown into the man who must relearn his sense of welcoming and generosity[8], accepts whatever is offered to him with joy and includes the little drummer boy among the rich who have named him king. This aspect of my Christology says that to be Jesus, to be holy, and inextricably connected with the divine, is see all people as the potential to bring forth wonderful things into the world.

"Get Up John,"[9] unlike "Jordan" and "The Little Drummer Boy," is not specifically about Jesus. For me, however, it represents what I personally consider to be one of the most overlooked and most essential elements of the story of Jesus Christ and therefore my Christology. John is not only one of the characters who is already doing the work that Jesus believes is his calling, or one of the first to help name that calling for Jesus, either privately or publicly depending on which Gospel one is reading. John the Baptist is also the first defining moment of how much of a sacrifice this path will entail for Jesus. For me, the moment when Jesus finds out that John has

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[8] Mt 15:26 (NRSV); Mk 7:27 (NRSV).

[9] Emmylou Harris, "Get Up John," on *Emmylou Harris and the Nash Ramblers At the Ryman* (Reprise Records, 1992).

been executed at the whim of Salome and her mother is the tilt of the entire story: if he continues on with this work, he will die. The presentation of John's head on a platter is also the presentation of a choice to Jesus: he can turn away from his calling, and live out a long healthy life at the expense of others who will continue to suffer, or he can continue to follow through on his mission and vision and it will lead to certain death. I do not hold to any Christology that declares Jesus to be wholly divine, because as a human I must have some connection to the man of Jesus to find the many narratives about his life meaningful. And so, "Get Up John" reminds me that Jesus as a man, as a Jew, so loved his friend John, and the world, that he chose the path of radical, revolutionary love because he saw no other way to fulfill God's primordial vision of greater Harmony. God did not demand this of him, nor did God send him down solely to be tortured and crucified. Jesus knew exactly what he was doing, including the dangers involved, and he therefore calls us to asks ourselves not just for what what are we fighting, but also, "For what are you willing to die?"

"Jerusalem Tomorrow"[10] was recorded by my mother during my transition from tween to teenager, and was my first profound experience with one work giving a different perspective on or interpretation of a previous work. Of course, at the time, I still had a vision of Christianity in my head and heart that was solidly built on what I experienced from my loving, open-minded musical community, and was only just beginning to encounter the terrible things said and done to people in the name of Jesus Christ. I played the song on repeat—not just because it broadened the picture I had in my head of the what the world looked and felt like when Jesus was alive, but also because it focused on his influence in that world from a humanist perspective that centered

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[10] Emmylou Harris, "Jerusalem Tomorrow," on *Cowgirl's Prayer* (Asylum Records, 1993).

on love as opposed to miracles. Of course, the Christian books of the Bible speak of miracles, some done in secret, some done openly, but "Jerusalem Tomorrow" gave me a witness to Jesus Christ in which the message did not require miracles to be proven worthy. Like the baby Jesus's encounter with the Little Drummer Boy, the purpose of bringing people together in love and kindness is just as powerful, if not moreso, than the riches (or "miracles") offered up to entice people without any real sense of something solid underneath to lift people up out of their poverty, their sadness, and their sickness. I also related personally to the narrator of the song, as someone who was highly skilled in the use of language as rhetoric and as a storyteller. The narrator's encounter with Jesus is a constant reminder to me that Jesus calls us to use our skills to help people, not to manipulate them, even if we must choose between manipulation and our own starvation. I left a lucrative screenwriting career to become a minister because I could no longer reconcile the directives I was given by producers and executives with this Christology.

One of the most difficult events in Jesus's life for me to relate to or find meaning in is the passion and crucifixion. As I said earlier, for me most of the power in the sacrifice has already happened with the death of John the Baptist. This ending should come as no surprise to a reader who has been paying attention; Chekhov's Gun must fire,[11] and all that is left is the how, as told to us by the writers of the canonical Gospels. What, for me, pulls them all together and leaves room for all the other witnesses to such a world-changing and tragic event is Jennifer Warnes's cover of "A Singer Must Die".[12] The direct connection is loose at best, with absolutely no specific reference to Jesus Christ, or even Judaism or Christianity, and yet the story of a singer

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[11] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chekhov%27s_gun

[12] Jennifer Warnes, "A Singer Must Die," on *Famous Blue Raincoat* (Cypress Records, 1987).

being put to death for the power of his voice that sings songs contrary to the "truth" of the established authority is the essential dynamic of Jesus's ministry. This is amplified, for me, by the production of the song with rich instrumentation and big choir vocals during the choruses interspersed with the stripped-down verses that showcase Warnes's powerful, passionate voice. All the individual parts are technically good on their own, but when brought together become something extraordinary, and worthy of the life and death of Jesus Christ. Karen Armstrong explains this phenomenon by claiming that "[m]usic goes beyond the reach of words: it is not about anything. […] In music, therefore, subjective and objective become one."[13] I can spend pages picking apart all the elements that went into the making of the recording, but ultimately the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and just as music has been a huge influence on my life and how I see the world, so does this song link me, in a deeply sensory way, to Jesus's ministry as a singer who changes the world with the power of his voice, even in the face of rejection.

As a woman, and now a mother, the other aspect of canonical Christianity that I have used music to find my personal way through is his death, and the lack of appreciation in Biblical texts for the sorrow felt by those he left behind—whether you believe he was bodily taken up in to heaven or not. The very first time I heard Patty Griffin's "Mary,"[14] I nearly had to pull my car off the road because I was so overwhelmed with emotional tears. The chorus validates a bodily resurrection belief, and yet also leaves room for the visual to be a metaphorical representation of a human Jesus martyring himself and living on throughout history in a "blaze of glory." It is a song that allows for various Christologies to hear the song and find themselves seeing the death

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[13] Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (Random House, 2009) Kindle loc 142.

[14] Patty Griffin, "Mary," on *Flaming Red* (A&M Records, 1998).

and resurrection from the perspective of his mother. We are invited to see her as more than just the vessel for the savior, and as the person who loved him as a baby in the manger, the little boy who was precocious in the temple, and the man who wandered the countryside seeking to bring down corruption. We hear a story of a woman, like so many other women then and now, who support those around them as the expense of their feelings being forgotten to history, and how they always end up "cleaning up the place" after everyone else goes home. The song also offers up that Jesus's last words may have been to his mother, to explain why he made the choice to follow in John the Baptist's path. Even in the midst of being freed from his suffering and the fulfillment of his purpose on earth, he still takes the time to remember the woman who cared for him. While I will always carry a humanist Jesus in my heart, this is a supernatural Jesus I can relate to, because he still carries his humanity with him on his way up to heaven, and allow us to always carry a Christology in which Jesus's mission and vision are still within reach of all of us humans left behind like Mary.

The final song on my Christology playlist not only brings us back to Christmas, but reincorporates Jesus's messages about rejecting corruption and the hoarding of riches. It even includes my earth-based religious leanings. Kate & Anna McGarrigle's cover of "The Rebel Jesus"[15] uses their beautiful, almost celestial, voices to layer the harsh, accusatory words with a veneer of gentleness. It is a firm but gentle reminder that as time has passed, Jesus's story and meaning of his life and choices on earth has been subjected to the same corruption and manipulation by those in power and comforted by riches as those he was rebelling against in his own time. The song even goes so far as to claim that "if any one of us should interfere in the

[15] Kate and Anna McGarrigle, "The Rebel Jesus," on *The McGarrigle Christmas Hour* (Nonesuch Records, 2005).

business of why there are poor they get the same as the rebel Jesus." And, just as the previous songs have formed my Christology as a man dedicated to the bringing forth the vision of a loving, inclusive God, so does the final verse acknowledge that the message is hard but that there's always room for forgiveness and acceptance: "In this life of hardship and of earthly toil, we have need for anything that frees us. So I bid you pleasure and I bid you cheer from a heathen and a pagan on the side of the rebel Jesus." Like Jeff Black's Noah coming down from the mountain to make a brand new start, this Jesus is able to be both prophetic and revolutionary while being pastoral and welcoming. That is a tension between two vocations that most ministers struggle to balance every single day.

As I hope I've shown, my Christology comes from rather untraditional sources and is constantly tested by how it holds up against a hermeneutic based on welcoming, inclusive outreach to the oppressed, ostracized, and disenfranchised. Part of that is forming a system of thinking about Jesus that not only meets my needs for accessibility to the average human life (as opposed to an unattainable divine perfection) but allows for my model to intersect and be informed by other people's Christologies. I need my Jesus to be a human, in whom God is both immanent and transcendent. I need to know that he was faced with difficult, oftentimes terrible choices, and did not say the right thing every single time he was confronted with conflict. I need to know that he could be both fully devoted to his vision *and* was willing to voice his doubts at the magnitude of his mission. I believe he mourned the loss of John the Baptist, and considered about what his choices would do to his parents. I don't want to believe in a Jesus Christ for whom these things are irrelevant.

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