The Representation and Racialization of Jesus in Art: Searching for a Connection
By Selina Lee

Jesus of Nazareth was a historical Palestinian Jew who, after his death and resurrection, became a mythologized messiah in Christianity. Representations of Jesus in art have been rooted in the desire to see him, and the social structures of society have inevitably led to racializing his image. In Western art, the prevalent image of Jesus is that of a white man with large eyes, fair complexion and high nose, such as in the works of Leonardo da Vinci. Although this kind of image has also become the standard one due to the power of the Western influence on Christianity and art, there are also alternative portraits of the “black Jesus,” the “mestizo Jesus,” and the “Asian Jesus,” among others. This process of racialization of Jesus poses dangers of a kind of privileged humanization and inclusion, leading to issues of racism and social inequity. It also raises the question of whether or not attempting to create a concrete image of Jesus falls under the sin of idolatry. However, the significance of the representation of Jesus in art lies in the need for Christians to identify with him, and to solidify their own identities by attempting to imagine and capture his image. The historical accuracy of Jesus as a person is as important as how his followers received and reacted to his legacy.

In contemporary society, there is a universal and standard image of Jesus Christ; most famous paintings portray him with a fair complexion, long brown hair, large eyes and a high nose, as exemplified by the famous “Head of Christ” by Leonardo da Vinci. The sheer impact of Western influence on other nations’ art, religion and culture has led to the domination of the image of the “white Christ.” Even though Jesus was a Palestinian Jew and would not have been historically “white,” as many influential figures in art and Christianity have been of Western
origin, it is inevitable that the dominant portrait of Christ has become Westernized. Thus, Jesus is “pre-racialized” as a white figure to many Christians.¹

Often articulated in art, the “history of Western Christian theology… has seen the ascendancy of Jesus as a white Christ with a resultant de facto white God endorsing white power claims over other racial or ethnic groups.”² However, Jesus has been increasingly “colored and re-racialized… [and not] only on the metaphorical level… but also as a historical figure,”³ in theology and in art. Some racial minority communities have expressed their dissatisfaction towards the dominant image of the “white Jesus,” based on their history of oppression and exploitation, arguing that it reflects values of white supremacy. Thus, there has been a rise of alternative portraits of racialization, tied in with the various forms of liberation theology of racial minorities in Christianity. For instance, black theology believes in the historical manifestation of Jesus as the “Oppressed One… among [the] poor, humiliated, [and] abused.”⁴ In this theology, Jesus becomes the “black Jesus,” connected directly to the African Americans who have a long history of social and political oppression by Western countries. This does not mean that black theologians necessarily believe that the historical Jesus was black, but it becomes a way to “make him most present here and now,” and in turn more accessible and relatable to the black community by imagining him in a different way.⁴

In a similar way, mestizo theology describes the “mixing” of two cultures. As Galilee was a “borderland territory, where a tremendous mixing of cultures took place” between the Jews and the Greek-Romans, Jesus belongs to “both cultures and yet not fully to either culture.”⁵

² Siker, 27.
³ Siker, 27.
⁴ Siker, 33.
⁵ Siker, 37.
Although these historical claims about Galilee and Jesus lack a “substantive foundation,” they call into question the “essentializing language of historically white Christianity” in overly identifying Jesus as white. Similarly, Eastern communities have developed their own images of Jesus, based on their cultures. Indian and Chinese images of Jesus portray him as a “wise teacher, as avatar, as the Way, as satayagrahi (truth holder), as advaitin, as one in solidarity with human striving for liberation, as bodhisattva-like wisdom.” These different portrayals of Jesus reflected in Asian art and theology in the manner of a Buddha or a Gandhi-like figure, reveal the varied cultural traditions, just as the “black Christ” and “mestizo Christ” reflect on the history of different communities. Alternative racial portraits of Jesus thus use racially categorized identities to “overturn oppression and bring liberation and empowerment” from the history of oppression and colonization, calling attention to the pervasiveness of a special white privilege.

Taking into account the different images of the racialized Christ, it is important to note that the main purpose of creating art is to visualize one’s inner desires and vision, both literally and metaphorically. An artist may choose to incorporate elements of reality with their own imaginative interpretations, and this freedom of expression is a crucial component of art. Similarly, the desire to visualize Jesus in art stems from the desire to see him in real life, and the portrait may vary from being true to history or dependent on various interpretations. With a physical and material image, it is easier to identify with Jesus, as well as to solidify one’s identity as a Christian. Society has become “increasingly visual” throughout history, which contributes to the impact and importance of images. Thus when racial minorities bring attention to the images of a differently racialized Jesus, they are seeking “full inclusion and… challenging a

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6 Siker, 38.
8 Siker, 49.
dominant racial ideology in the process… so that ruling metaphors simply shift rather than being ultimately subverted.”10 Different modes of racialization in Jesus’ image allow different racial communities to identify with him in a more varied and complete way, affirming their religious and social identities. Significantly, even more so than in the twenty-first century, during the “sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, art was a major form of biblical interpretation, [and] art did not merely reiterate the biblical events but provided the viewer with a visual hermeneutic.”11 It is not surprising, then, that the prevalent image of Jesus in art is a “white Jesus,” as Western artists aim to make their portraits relatable and identifiable to themselves and their audience, just as contemporary black and mestizo theologians made their respective images of Jesus closer to their own communities.

However, in representing Jesus in art in such detailed fashion, there is a question of whether or not the act can be viewed as the sin of idolatry. In Exodus 20:4, the Ten Commandments clearly state, “You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heave above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” Arguably, it is reasonable to view the act of recreating the image of Jesus in material form, such as sculptures or paintings, as idolatry. Opponents of such images have insisted that Christ, as the “True Image of God,” is “beyond description… comprehension… change, and… measure,” and “illegitimate to portray in images.”12 Further invoking the language of the Council of Chalcedon, opponents have declared the portrayal of the Son of God in art as blasphemy by either violating his essential nature as beyond description and conscription, or by separating his two natures and dividing his one person.11 Even artists who made such

10 Siker, 50.
“prohibited” art, and not just the idolaters who worshiped the images, were criticized as practicing a “deceptive art.”

John of Damascus, however, points to the fact that God was the first and original image-maker, and that Jesus, his son, was the living image of his invisible father. God had prohibited idolatrous attempts to depict divine beings in material form, yet had taken the “initiative of depicting himself in visible form, and had done so not in metaphor or in memorial but… quite literally, in the flesh.” Since God became manifest in Jesus, a divine and human person, the “metaphysical had become historical, and the cosmic Logos who was the true image of the Father from eternity had now become a part of time and could be portrayed in an image.” God created humans in his own image, but Jesus was the fully realized representation of him; in Jesus’ incarnation, God allowed humans to portray him in an image without making it idolatry, as Jesus was his word in flesh. As Molanus argues in *Treatise on Sacred Images*, God “can be portrayed by means of symbolic images, so long as knowledgeable clerics explain to the Christian faithful the precise semiotic value,” and these images serve as “exegetical prompts” that can be “used to explicate divine mysteries embodied in scriptural events.” In other words, there is no harm in portraying Jesus through art, or in seeking a more detailed image through methods like racialization, because it can clarify one’s faith and identity by transforming a metaphorical concept into a visible reality.

Returning to the point of art incorporating both historical and metaphorical aspects, it is important to view Jesus in the same manner. Marcus Borg identifies the “pre-Easter Jesus” and

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13 Pelikan, 85.
14 Pelikan, 89.
15 Pelikan, 94.
16 Barrett, 221.
17 Barrett, 222-223.
the “post-Easter Jesus,” distinguishing the human nature and messianic nature of Christ, and divides history into “history remembered” and “history metaphorized,” separating concrete facts from metaphorical narratives. Similarly, N.T. Wright emphasizes that we know about Jesus through history and faith, stressing the need to recognize Jesus as a human being and as the divine messiah. Borg believes that the birth stories of Jesus are not literal but metaphorized, explaining how the narratives are laden with metaphorical images and language that should not be taken factually. This concept of history versus metaphor is also crucial in the representation of Jesus in art. There are two categories of images, the metaphysical and historical, which allow for a poetic and artistic understanding of Jesus, at once separate and harmonious with a historical understanding. As Jesus is a being with two natures, the human and the divine or the historical and the metaphoric, recreating him in art would inevitably portray him in a similar fashion.

Racialization of Jesus in art is thus significant in efforts to both maintain a historical and factual recreation, and to create a creative interpretation. Iconic symbols that express religious figures of faith can modernize the figure. Cultural and aesthetic differences in adaptations of Jesus’ portrait are not completely incorrect, even if they are historically accurate; the different image is true and familiar to certain groups of people, and just as there is no “wrong” answer in art, there can be no “wrong” desire to view Jesus as a certain race. Every individual has a different sense of the “really real,” or the “essence of truth… with his or her personal and private space and consciousness.” If there is a “remembered” history and “metaphorized” history,

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19 Borg and Wright, 5
20 Borg and Wright, 15.
21 Borg and Wright, 186.
22 Pelikan, 91.
23 Hendricks, 15.
24 Keenan, 256.
narratives and descriptions of Jesus and his being are also embedded with “historical” and
“metaphoric” meanings. Jesus was historically a Palestinian Jew, and not Asian, black, or white,
and the alternate modes of racialization are the products of different Christians who hold a
unique sense of remembering and viewing Jesus’ being.

It is important to be implicitly and explicitly conscious of the claims that others make
about the identity of Jesus, to be able to better “integrate and celebrate the richness of
incarnation, as well as see the limitations of human efforts to read the complexity of human
experience into the identity of Jesus of Nazareth.”25 Different racial groups sought to portray
Jesus in their own race, framing his image within the context of their cultural traditions, as well as
common values and occurrences, such as oppression and humiliation. The “metaphorized” way
of interpreting Jesus as the divine messiah establishes a stronger bond and foundation for these
marginalized communities, as this metaphorical racialization allows them to better identify and
relate with him, as well as to understand their own identities. Thus, Christians need not be
“confined” only to traditional images of Jesus, as the language and portrayals depend on the time
and culture;24 the abundant imagery and symbolism in the different portrayals of Jesus may aid
in developing a “full understanding of the mystery”26 of Christ.

Art has the freedom to be either factually correct or freely interpretive. Representations of
Jesus in images are drawn from the desire to see him in reality, but the prevalent image of Jesus
today is that of a white man with large eyes, fair complexion and high nose, exemplified by the
paintings of Leonardo da Vinci. Although the image of the “white Jesus” has become
standardized due to the Western influence on religion and art across the world, alternative
portraits have also become prominent. Examples include the “black Jesus,” the “mestizo Jesus,”

25 Siker, 53.
26 Keenan, 257
and the “Asian Jesus,” among others. The social structures of contemporary society have naturally led to the racialization of Jesus’ image, and although he was historically a Palestinian Jew, there are many variations of his appearance in art. The act of representing Jesus in art, however, raises the controversial question of whether or not it is a sin of idolatry. However, as Jesus is the Son of God and God’s own image in flesh, it should not be considered idolatry to portray him. Also, the significance of the different ways of racializing Jesus in art lies in the need for Christians to identify with him, and to solidify their own identities by attempting to capture his image. Marginalized and oppressed communities are able to connect to Jesus and their faith better by interpreting him according to their history, culture and traditions, and this is comforting. The historical accuracy of Jesus as a person is as important as how his followers interpreted the metaphoric narratives of his being. By being open to the representation and racialization of Jesus, Christians have the ability to reach a new and fuller sense of understanding about Jesus and fellow Christians.
Works Cited


