

The Quest for the Cuban Christ

A Historical Search

Miguel A. De La Torre

Foreword by Stephen W. Angell and Anthony B. Pinn, Series Editors

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Contents

List of Figures ix

Foreword by Stephen W. Angell and Anthony B. Pinn xi

Preface xiii

Part I. A Historical Quest

1. The Conquistador Christ 3

2. The Martí Christ 26

3. The Black Cuban Christ 45

4. The Female Cuban Christ 65

5. Three Christs for the Twentieth Century 84

Part II. A Present-Day Quest

6. The Ajiaco Christ 117

Notes 171

Bibliography 179

Index 189

Foreword

The History of African-American Religions series seeks to further historical investigations into the varieties of African-American religions and to encourage the development of new and expanded paradigms, methodologies, and themes for the study of these religions. The editors see this series as an opportunity to expand the knowledge of African-American religious expression and institutional developments to include underappreciated regions and forms. This fine volume by Miguel A. De La Torre, the third in our series, concretely demonstrates that by the word *American* we include the whole of the Americas, including the Afro-Latin diaspora of the Caribbean and of Central and South America.

The story of religion in Cuba, an island only ninety miles from U.S. shores, uniquely brings together North American and Latin American realities that mutually and unexpectedly illuminate each other. Even the most cursory consumers of headline news found their minds and emotions engaged by the controversy over a six-year-old Cuban boy, Elián González, which preoccupied Cuban and American officials and their respective publics from November 1999 to April 2000. De La Torre, in his brief comment on this matter, throws new light on the religious significance of the Elián story, so he does not ignore the topical.

But he goes much further, illuminating the current reality of Resident and Exilic Cubans by making profound use of long-ago manifestations of this bifurcation of Cuban existence. He highlights the ambiguity of usable memories by showing how the present exiles and Cuban residents both misappropriate and justifiably appropriate the figure of José Martí, a North American exile for fourteen years before his martyrdom for the cause of Cuban independence. At times, De La Torre's quest for the historical Martí seems to be as intricate as the quest by Albert Schweitzer and others for the historical Jesus. And De La Torre shows that even Fidel

Castro himself found the North American exile community useful in 1955, as he raised funds for his coming campaign against the regime of Fulgencio Batista.

Inevitably, the race question in Cuba looks somewhat different from the way it appears on the other side of the Florida Straits. "Blackness" is not always as obvious a theme in De La Torre's work as it will be in many other volumes in this series, but it remains a very important factor in the background and sometimes in the foreground. De La Torre provides a forcible rejoinder to those (including, at times, Castro) who have insisted that Cuba does not have a problem with racial discrimination. Neither does De La Torre portray Cuba as employing the mestizo racial category as easily as most other Latin American nations. But, quite appropriately, not all matters of oppression and injustice in Cuba are rendered in black-and-white dimensions. In fact, the opening of his book gives a penetrating look at the original sin of Cuban existence, what he calls the Spanish "ethnocide" of the island's aboriginal inhabitants, the Taíno. De La Torre commendably resists efforts to reduce Cuban complexities to patterns more familiar to its North American neighbors.

De La Torre's study gains great strength from its fascinating blending of methodologies, including ethnohistory, historical theology, and art history. Just as the Cuban and American historical relationship plays on minds and hearts at many levels, so does this work. As De La Torre methodically searches the Cuban cultural inventory for a vision of Christ that will speak to all of the varying needs of Cuba's *humildes* (the poor), he will bring all of his readers to new levels of appreciation of the richness and poignancy of Cuban religion and history. Readers are urged not to overlook the beauty and provocativeness of the images that he has employed to illustrate his concept of the "*ajiaco* Christ." These he hopes will truly pull together the significant themes from the essence of Christ's nature to speak to the spiritual needs of the *humildes*. Anyone interested in liberation theology will find important insights in De La Torre's book.

For all of these reasons, we strongly commend this illuminating book to the widest possible readership.

Stephen W. Angell and Anthony B. Pinn
Series Editors

Preface

When Pope John Paul II visited Cuba in 1998, he began his pontificate with these challenging words: "Do not be afraid to open your hearts to Christ." The question, though, is "Whose Christ?" Anyone who reads the biblical story of Christ does so from a particular social location. We are all born into a culture that shapes and forms us. When we turn our attention to the biblical text as the source for understanding who Christ was, we participate in a dialogue between the written word and the meanings our community taught us to give to these words. Cubans, especially those living in the diaspora, have been taught to read the Bible through the eyes of white, middle-class Euroamerican males. Yet, can the text speak to Cubans through their own culture? To do so, it must be read with Cuban eyes.

But how do we learn to read the biblical story of Jesus with Cuban eyes? After all, Cuba appears to have always been the fantasy island of dreams, an illusion of outsiders' imaginations. As a people, Cubans have existed on the periphery of the colonial venture, first as a colony of Spain, then as a neoimperial satellite of the United States. Yet these fantasies have nothing to do with Cuba's reality when ascertained from the Cuban center. If history is kept in the memory of a people, a memory at times intoxicated with false memories, how then do Cubans recall their history apart from the imagery imposed upon them by the colonial gaze? And how does this history contribute to the creation of a Christ who is Cuban? Any religious reflection or speculation on the divine requires an understanding of the historico-ideological genesis of its principles, especially its spatial, worldly setting. Hence the development of a Cuban perspective on Christ is frustrated by the imposing dominance of Eurocentric thought.

In 1910 Albert Schweitzer published the English version of his book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. His groundbreaking work revolutionized both biblical studies and christological scholarship while creating tremendous controversy. He presented the notion that Jesus of Nazareth

could not be apprehended except in the historical particularity and social circumstances of Jesus' own time. All attempts since the so-called Age of Enlightenment to write the life of Jesus were futile, he believed, because scholars read their own ideals into the sources. Schweitzer's pronouncements proved unwelcome news to those who wanted to see Jesus as the product of the age of modernity, a prophet of reason and progress. Without a doubt Schweitzer's work changed the course of Christian scholarship.

Almost a century later, my own endeavor at Christology is more modest. While the Eurocentric search for Jesus created a schism between the historical person named Jesus and the Christ of faith constructed by the church, I attempt to affirm simply that whatever Christ means for a people (in the case of this book, Cubans), he must be understood within the socio-historical and the ecocultural context of those responding to the biblical text. Why should we even bother searching for the religious symbol of Christ in order to better understand the Cuban culture? For us to comprehend the diverse elements of any culture, careful attention must be given to its implicit connection to religious traditions and heritages, for the so-called secular space is at times an amalgam of the sacred customs and convictions of previous generations. Hence, the Cuban search for Christ raises more questions and concerns about those doing the searching than about the figure of Christ. Who are these readers whom we call Cubans? How do they apprehend this text about Jesus? How is this comprehension developed when the search originates and occurs from the underside of Cuban history?

This book argues that for Cubans, Christ must be understood through the historical development of Cuban culture. Clement of Alexandria once said, "God saved the Jews in a Jewish way, the barbarians in a barbarian way." The Brazilian liberation theologian Carlos Mesters continued this trend of thought by stating, "God saves Brazilians in a Brazilian way, blacks in a black way, Indians in an Indian way, Nicaraguans in a Nicaraguan way, and so on." I would add, God saves Cubans in a Cuban way. What then is the Cuban way of being saved? As I shall argue, God's movement in Cuban history translates both Christian principles and an understanding of Christ into cultural symbols understood by all Cubans, Resident and Exilic. Theological reflections become incarnated through the historical social location of Cubans. The Christ of the conquistadors, the apotheosis of Martí as the ideal Cuban Christ, the Black Christ of the African slaves, the understanding of Christ through Marianism, the Euroamerican Christ, the Christ of the Revolution, and the Exilic Christ are all

a part of, if not central to, Cuban identity. As such, this book attempts to come to terms with these sociohistorical dimensions formulated within the depths of Cuban culture. By seriously reevaluating these cultural symbols, we can find rich resources for understanding Cubans and their God. Additionally, this quest can serve as a paradigm for non-Cuban groups wishing to search within their own culture for the presence of the divine.

Until now, few scholars of the Cuban experience approached their studies from a sophisticated religious scholarly perspective. The religiosity of Cubans is seldom taken into consideration when attempting to understand the Cuban ethos, with the possible exception of inquiries into Santería. Likewise, few Exilic Cuban religious scholars address their social location from within the context of the sociopolitical power achieved by the Cuban community in the United States. Ironically, while many of these scholars may claim to do "grass-roots theology," the Cuban experience, specifically as manifested in Miami, is seldom consulted. Why? Most Exilic Cuban religious scholars are highly influenced by the liberationist tendency of Latino theology. Rooted in the theological movement of Latin America known as "liberation theology," this liberationist tendency is not adverse to using Marxist economic analysis to elucidate the religious impetus of those who are most economically oppressed. Because liberation theology has been portrayed as a communist movement by those in power, and because of the overall abhorrence Exilic Cubans have toward communism, is it any wonder that Exilic Cuban scholars have found little, if any, reception among the Exilic Cuban audience? Regardless, this book will investigate how Cubans perceived Christ so as to better understand the identity of the Cubans who are doing the perceiving.

Our quest begins with an understanding of the Christ brought to the island by the conquistadors and the tension created with the Christ of those who suffered by the conquistadors' swords. The quest continues with the nationalistic Christ of Varela and the postnationalistic Christ of Martí. After Cuba gained independence from Spain, the Cuban understanding of Christ further developed through the influence of Cuban slaves, Santería, and the early twentieth-century Cuban feminist movement. More recently, liberation theology and revolution theology contributed to the development of the Cuban Christ. The final section of this work will tie together all of these diverse trends by turning our attention to art. The works of Cuban artists, both on the island and in the States, depicting the image of Christ will be closely examined. These paintings provide the observer with insight about, and an entry into, reality. Several works by