

Edward J. Blum: Color of Christ

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I thumbed through a stack of Xeroxed images, looking at the multiple faces of Jesus that a friend compiled for her theology paper. She had gone to the library and photocopied profiles from around the globe. I had studied to be a missionary as an undergraduate student, so I was familiar with most of the contextual depictions. Still, this was before magic of Google, before we could summon a bevy of spellbinding images with the stroke of our fingertips, so the experience had a hypnotic effect. Seeing how the cheekbones, chin, eyes, and skin color evolved with each artistic interpretation enchanted me.

Then, I got to an image that I had never seen. It was a crude black-and-white photocopy of [Edwina Sandys's depiction of Jesus on the cross](#).

*Wait. Jesus has breasts, I thought. This is blasphemous.*

Repulsed, I wanted to throw the paper down. Instead, I grasped onto it tighter as I argued with myself. *Why would it feel so heretical to have a depiction of Jesus as a woman?* I looked at Christ from every sort of abstract and cultural angle without aversion. Why did my gut suddenly roil with disgust?

Warner Sallman's [Head of Christ](#), with that soft-focus Jesus and the Olan-Mills backdrop, hovered in my subconscious without any objection from my innards. The hip and sandy-haired Savior at the beach portrayed in my Children's Bible always

made sense to me as a girl growing up in Florida. Both depictions of my Jesus were domesticated for the consumption of white Americans. I knew that the images were a far cry from the biblical accounts of where Jesus originated. Why was I okay with them but I recoiled from this feminine Christ?

A few years earlier, I had been at a conservative Bible college when the National Endowment of the Arts was under attack by conservative Christians because they supported the art of [Andres Serrano](#). I defended the artist's [controversial depictions of Jesus](#) against my fundamentalist classmates, on the basis of their aesthetic value as well as the fact that urine is part of an incarnational reality.

So why did my intestines turn in revulsion at the sight of a woman hanging on the cross? Why did it bother me so much that an artist would imagine that Jesus, in the height of his suffering, might take on the flesh and blood of a female? Why did it offend me that an artist would depict the crucified Christ with breasts, an embodied source of nourishment and comfort? Was I still living with the residual effects of my conservative Christian upbringing? Had I internalized the submission teaching, purity shaming, disordered eating, and baptized misogyny so much that I still hated my body? Why did I cringe at the sight?

I looked down at the title: "Christa." My name was Christa. It was my middle name. Since I was born on December 24, I always assumed that I was named after Christmas. I never imagined that I was named after Christ.

Christa. That small word shifted my perspective on the sculpture and that nauseous revulsion turned into a bit of adrenalized empowerment, as I wondered, *Could there be something Christ-like about me?*

As I read [Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America](#), I thought about that afternoon and how one portrayal could reveal so much about my struggles with Christianity on a spiritual and societal level. Within the book, historians Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey tell the stories of our depictions of Jesus, and how they are used throughout our history as a source of oppression, shaming and empowerment. Each page uncovers the racial context and history of our sacred images and gives us a lens to recognize how Jesus is used in the formation of our present art and media.

So when we come to works like [The Bible](#) miniseries, we see the advertising tweets from Rick Warren and we receive promotional emails from Jim Wallis. Yet we also

know our present racial context. We understand the difficulties of Muslim and Christian relations. We grieve at the intensity of hate crimes against Muslims. We preach against the Islamophobia that has arisen with fury in our country. So can we evoke our hermeneutics of suspicion when we look at the [cast of characters](#) and see that Jesus is a white man and Satan is a Middle Eastern man in the series?

I had the opportunity to talk to Ed Blum about the *Color of Christ* for [God Complex Radio](#). I was amazed at his insights as well as the thoughtful commentary of my cohost, Derrick Weston as they both struggled with how these images have formed us and informed us as people of faith. And if you want to keep up with more of Ed's work, he is editing [Then and Now](#), a new blog here on the *Christian Century*.