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# Jesus, Religion, Gender

## *Introduction*

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This special issue of *Religion and Gender* explores gendered presentations and constructions of Jesus from antiquity to the present. Sharing a broadly intersectional approach to gender analysis, the authors in this issue offer new insights into the dynamics of religion and gender, particularly as these dynamics concern central religious figures such as Jesus. The issue sheds new light on a diverse religious tradition by analyzing the gendering of one of its key protagonists in multiple receptions within the tradition. Scholars from various disciplines and fields will benefit from engaging this issue-long case study of several varieties of religious genderings of Jesus. The remainder of this introduction brings forward the historic question of Jesus' identity, surveys the topic of the gendered reception of Jesus, and introduces the issue articles within the context of the wider field.

### 1 Who Do You Say That I Am?

Midway through Mark's gospel Jesus is depicted as asking his followers for rumors about his identity. Some people, he learns, think he is the recently assassinated wilderness preacher John the Baptist. Others think he is one of the old Hebrew prophets, such as Elijah, come back to life. Jesus then asks his followers, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter's response, "You are the Messiah" is met with Jesus' demand that they not reveal this truth to anyone (Mark 8:27–30, NRSV).

Jesus' questions about perceptions of his identity have resonated throughout the centuries, giving rise to many different answers in Christian, Jewish, Islamic, post-Christian, and other cultures across the globe. With the development of historical-critical methods since the seventeenth century, attempts to answer these questions have often drawn on historical reconstructions of Christian origins, the redaction history of the gospels, and the reception history of the New Testament and related oral and textual traditions. The rise of philosophical hermeneutics, with its attention to how a reader's context shapes their reading, and the expansion of theory and political critique in the humanities have led to an increasing proliferation of answers to the questions of Jesus' identity, now understood not merely as questions about history—who was the first-century Palestinian Jew, Jesus of Nazareth?—but as questions about cultural reception and construction. Answers to questions about Jesus' identity have effects, including on cultural constructions of gender.

## 2 The Gendered Reception of Jesus: Backgrounds, Contents, and Beyond

### 2.1 *Backgrounds*

The present issue of *Religion and Gender* advances inquiry into a variety of receptions and constructions of Jesus through the lens of gender. Employing a wide range of methods and sources, the authors in this issue suggest that any account of Jesus must attend to the gendered character of his own practices and of representations of him. Gender, in other words, is always a significant component of culture, in fact, gender constructions emerge at the intersection of various dimensions of identity within any given cultural setting, including sexuality, race, ethnicity, and economics; gender constructions are both products of cultures and significant factors in the shaping of cultures. This makes gender constructions a necessary focus for textual interpretation and religious history. Without gendering Jesus, we fail to understand who people have thought Jesus to be and, to the extent that a history of Jesus is possible, who Jesus in fact was (and, for some religious communities, is today), and what kind of effect he (has) had on people.

There are, beyond the quest for scholarly thoroughness, several reasons to undertake a study of Jesus as a gendered person. Part of the turn to theory and politics in the humanities has been the recognition that no representation is innocent of power. Feminism, gay and lesbian studies, and queer theory have drawn particular attention to how conceptions of gender and sexuality are always active in regimes of power. Gender is a key term in the organization

of social hierarchies, and persons perceived as embodying non-normative genders are often objects of discrimination, exclusion, and persecution. Given the many ways Jesus has been taken up and represented by powerful political, cultural, and religious forces, investigation of the gendered dimensions of his life and reception opens vital paths for the understanding and criticism of power.

Among the many potential examples we could offer here, we focus on one drawn from one of our traditions. One of us (Pitts) is a Mennonite. The most influential representation of Jesus in the Mennonite tradition is John Howard Yoder's *Politics of Jesus* (1994). In that book, first published in 1972, Yoder contended that Christian ethicists persistently overlooked what had become widely accepted in New Testament studies and 1960s youth culture: that central to Jesus' ministry was a determinate politics. Among the features of that politics were, according to Yoder, a distributive, egalitarian political economy and a refusal to take power by coercive or violent means. For Yoder, Jesus' trust in God for the outcome of world history freed Jesus and his followers from the need to bring about immediate, widespread social change, and thus freed them for creative political experimentation at the community level. With reference to gender relations, this approach to politics resulted in the early church's "revolutionary subordination," its acceptance of gendered norms in society—and so of the subordination of women—even as it revolutionized these norms within its own communities (Yoder 1994, chap. 9). In *The Politics of Jesus* and in other writings (e.g., Yoder 2001), Yoder emphasized how such alternative communities often had much larger impacts on society.

Although Yoder's call for revolutionary subordination received some criticism from feminist theologians (e.g., Schüssler Fiorenza 1984, 81–83), *The Politics of Jesus* became the definitive theological text in the Mennonite tradition and had a wide impact beyond Mennonite circles. Its reputation, however, was severely damaged in 2015 when historian Rachel Waltner Goossen published the results of her investigation into Yoder's abuse of at least one-hundred women over several decades and in multiple countries (Waltner Goossen 2015). This abuse, which was not widely known about or discussed prior to Waltner Goossen's publication, cast deep shadows over Yoder's theology, particularly since he defended his abusive behavior with his full arsenal of theological arguments—including his interpretation of the politics of Jesus and the local experimentation it warrants.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging Yoder's abuse of power consequently requires revisiting his representation of Jesus' power with the tools of gender criticism in hand.

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1 See Pitts 2015 for further discussion.

Sexually abusive theologians who explicitly link their theological constructions of Jesus' identity to their own violence may be a rarity, but they point to a more common issue that also bears consideration. Patriarchal and masculinist interpretations of Jesus abound in religious communities, and the damage they cause becomes a general problem for pastoral care and counseling. Here an example from one of our other traditions is relevant. In the Old Catholic Church, Smit's tradition, the question of pastoral care has also become bound up with the abuse of the trust inherent to pastoral relationships—a report was published in 2017 concerning cases of sexualized abuse in the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands, for instance.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, the Old Catholic tradition is representative of many, if not most, churches that have had to face painful truths, often thanks to courageous people speaking up, as to the harm that has been done in their name and by their representatives. Causes and legitimizations of such harm by perpetrators are many, but one is certainly that those representing Jesus are thought to be trustworthy in pastoral relationships, which has everything to do with the kinds of masculinities (and femininities) such people, clergy, embody and perform. When reflecting on our own positionality in religious traditions, we also would like to at least acknowledge our awareness of doing scholarship from our own (relatively privileged) gendered positions; we hope that the close cooperation with the editors of *Religion & Gender* has helped us to avoid the worst pitfalls in this regard.

As we have seen from these examples, representations of Jesus make a difference—a difference that can be violent and abusive or healing and liberating—in a variety of communities today, and they do so in part by projecting normative conceptions of gender in and through those representations. Scholarly research on the pliability and ambiguity of Jesus' gender, from the New Testament era to the present, can therefore alleviate some of the pressure reinforcing the imposition of normative gender identities and practices. Our hope is that this issue, which is one of the very few single volume studies of Jesus and gender available,<sup>3</sup> will not only spur additional research but also be used in courses on religion and gender, the historical Jesus, Christology, and other topics to introduce new generations of students to the complexities and possibilities of gendering Jesus.

2 In the summer of 2019 (25–30 August), a conference on the topic took place in Wislikofen, Switzerland, the proceedings of which will be published in the *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* in the course of 2020.

3 There is an important tradition of feminist theology that draws attention to questions surrounding Jesus and gender. For example, Parks 2019, Schüssler Fiorenza 1983, Schüssler Fiorenza 1994, and Slee 2011. Book-length studies of Jesus and masculinity include Asikainen 2018 and Conway 2008. See also Van Klinken and Smit 2013.

## 2.2 *This Volume within the Wider Field*

Each of the articles included in this issue of *Religion and Gender* display the importance of paying attention to gender when trying to interpret representations of Jesus and their broader cultural and political effects. Notably, the articles do so through a variety of methodological and disciplinary approaches and through the study of a range of source materials, from Jewish sacred texts to Roman graffiti, and from a Philippine icon to an American film. This pluralism of interpretive strategies indicates the interdisciplinarity needed to research Jesus and gender. The interdisciplinary character of these articles, in turn, indicates the broad possibilities for further research and the broad potential impact of becoming sensitive to the gendered aspects of representations of Jesus and their effects.

Such research, as represented by the essays in this volume, gives insight into a number of overarching topics. These include the following. First, researching Jesus and gender shows how religiously inspired and/or legitimated constructions of gender, in Jesus' case, predominantly (a wide range of) masculinities, can be both a help and a hindrance, a resource and catalyst or an obstacle for developing wholesome performances of gender. Second, a particular aspect of the former point is that this research underlines the close connection between Christologies (in the broad sense of representations of Christ) and anthropologies in (and beyond) Christian tradition: the kind of humanity that Jesus (Christ) is seen to embody legitimizes it for all who consider him to be a normative figure, which has, of course, ethical consequences. Third, this second point also highlights that (a) interpretations always result in a praxis, or legitimate an existing praxis; (b) accordingly, there is no such thing as an innocent interpretation of, in this case, Jesus as a gendered person. Fourth, these latter two points also invite exploring similar connections in other traditions and normative figures within it—through studies, for example, on gendering Mohammed (cf. Duderika, Alak, and Hissong 2020), Buddha (Powers 2009, Powers 2018), or Osanobua, or, by way of parallel, gendering Mary (Alvarez 2016, Boss 2000, Lee 2017, Vuola 2019), Kali (Oleszkiewicz-Peralba 2015), or Mbaba Mwana Waresa, to explore analogous connections in other traditions (or with regard to female or non-binary deities). Fifth, as has become apparent throughout the essays contained in this volume, gender is always more than just gender; this is to be expected when considering gender as an intersectional phenomenon, yet it is worth stressing. Intersectional analysis suggests that gendering is connected to many aspects of one's socio-cultural and socio-political sphere. Sixth, the present essays demonstrate how such intersectionality can be explored with relation to Jesus/Christology. In doing so, it becomes also apparent that studying intersectional phenomena requires an interdisciplinary approach. Seventh

and finally, such an interdisciplinary approach to intersectional phenomena is furthered and enhanced by the combination of diachronic and intercultural perspectives, i.e., by the inclusion of cases from different historical periods and different cultural contexts; contextuality and crosscultural comparison functions as a catalyst for unveiling dimensions of gender that would be overlooked when only studying it in a single context or single timeframe (see Krondorfer 2009 for a similar approach examining Jewish and Christian masculinities). For readers of this volume, this point means that the best perspective on the gendering of Jesus is gained by considering the ensemble of the texts presented here, rather than just one or two of them. As editors, we hope that doing so will both enhance insight into the connections between Christologies, gender, gendered anthropologies and their consequences, as well as inspire further research in this and analogous or related fields.

### 2.3 *On the Essays in This Volume*

The issue begins with Christopher Zeichman's article on "Same-Sex Intercourse Involving Jewish Men, 100 BCE–100 CE." Zeichman challenges conclusions about Jesus' attitudes to same-sex intercourse based on assumptions that Jews universally proscribed such activity. Presenting evidence both for Jewish same-sex intercourse and for diverse Jewish reactions to it, Zeichman calls interpreters of Jesus to more careful exegesis, exegesis that respects the complexity of first-century Judaism and of Jesus' place in it.

Albert Hogeterp's article, "Gendering Jesus the Jew," provides a further example of the benefits of close reading. Hogeterp compares early literary and iconographic depictions of Jesus' physical and social appearance with contemporary Jewish and Greco-Roman depictions of ideal men, as well as with recent historical reconstructions of Jesus' likely appearance. The evidence, Hogeterp suggests, strengthens the case that Jesus challenged elite conceptions of masculinity and, indeed, elite men. At this point the implications of careful exegesis for discussions of power are evident. Moreover, Hogeterp sees these implications spreading beyond historiography and into Christological doctrine. Developing textual and iconographic traditions of representing Jesus as the Christ, God's chosen messiah, carry forward some elements of Jesus' subversive masculinity while downplaying other elements.

Ancient and modern representations of Jesus are put into conversation by Rocío Figueroa Alvear and David Tombs. In their article "Recognising Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse: Responses from Sodalicio Survivors in Peru", they interpret ancient depictions of crucifixion as including sexual torture, which for the authors opens the possibility of speaking of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. This possibility in turn opens new paths for Christian churches today respond-

ing to sexual abuse, as it was also explored through interviews with Peruvian sexual abuse survivors. If the crucifixion of Jesus should be understood not only as generic violence against Jesus' body, but also as specifically sexual violation of Jesus' gendered body, then churches may have a specific obligation to victims of sexual- and gender-based violence. Churches, we might add, may also need to revisit their theology of the cross in light of the material presented by Figueroa Alvear and Tombs.

Figueroa Alvear and Tombs's article points to the reality that images of Jesus have circulated in and have been transformed by a wide variety of cultures around the world. Peter-Ben Smit's article on "Masculinity and the Holy Child of the *Birhen sa Balintawak*" pursues questions about a postcolonial representation of Jesus and the Virgin Mary in the Philippines that emerged during the Philippine-Spanish War at the end of the nineteenth century and subsequently became popular in the twentieth century. Arguing for a more integrated, intersectional methodological approach to religion and masculinity studies, Smit shows how ethnic and other iconographic dimensions of this indigenous Philippine construction of Jesus were deployed in order to valorize a form of revolutionary Philippine masculinity. Considering the Philippine "Holy Child" alongside the representations of Jesus discussed in the other articles reminds readers that practices of gendering Jesus can support diverse political strategies.

This fact is vividly brought into the present in Grace Emmett's article, "You Weakened Him': Jesus' Masculinity in *Mary Magdalene*." Emmett studies the portrayal of Jesus by actor Joaquin Phoenix in the recent film *Mary Magdalene*. Attending especially to Phoenix's body and voice in comparison with Jesus characters from other films, Emmett identifies the Jesus of *Mary Magdalene* as an example of "positive masculinity," of a male who disrupts gendered expectations of him in favor of solidarity with women. This Jesus offers a model of alternative masculinity, alternative for instance to the masculinity of the film's original distributor, Harvey Weinstein.

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