Masculinities and Identity

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Introduction

Christianity, like many of the world religious traditions, is marked by the dominance of patriarchal structures and androcentric frameworks. But it has also contributed to developing and imagining alternative ideals of masculinity as well as non-heteronormative gender relations. Christianity, in other words, has contributed both to the enforcement of normative gender codes as well as to gender fluidity. This ambiguity has become pronounced in modernity when Western Christianity underwent a change from an all-encompassing worldview and pervasive social practice to a matter of personal faith and social choice.

With the onset of modernity and its concomitant secularisation processes in Europe, Christian masculine identity suffered a crisis: the privatisation and sentimentalisation of religion in the nineteenth century led to a problem of identification and a decline of male participation in church life, even when positions of authority remained, for a long time, in the hands of select men who often belonged to a professionally trained class. Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, we can observe the resurgence of conservative forms of religiososity, including fervent fundamentalist movements in all major world religions, that attempt to re-patriarchalise and re-masculinise religious life. Whereas mainline churches are trying to balance between demands for holding on to traditional gender expectations and requests for greater gender equity and equality, World Christianity today is pulled into divergent directions. Active religious voices on both sides feel strongly about the failure of Christianity to address adequately the issue of gender. If one were to describe it in terms of a simplified contrast, it would read thus: One side places men and women into a divinely-mandated order of hierarchical relations within fixed divisions of labour and role expectations; for the other side, gender is a fluid category that allows humans, as God’s creatures, to explore fully their sexed and gendered identities within a divinely-granted freedom. The religious-ideological spectrum reaches from fundamentalist-leaning movements that insist on a biblical-based, divine order of gender separation/gender complementarity to Christian gay and queer movements calling for a radical reorientation of heteronormative, sex-repressive practices and values. At stake in these debates...
are not only the freedom, equality, and safe-guarding of the rights of women and sexual minorities, but also the identities of Christian men generally.

A Short History: Emergence of Christian Masculinities

Two moments in the origins and development of Christianity have significantly shaped Christian notions of masculine identity: the belief in the incarnation of the saviour figure, and the virtue of chastity. They have provided men with a rationale for securing male privilege within hierarchical institutions, but also have motivated them to experiment with alternatives to hegemonic masculinity.

As told in New Testament writings, the disciples and early followers of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish-born man, believed him to be the Messiah, the son of God (see Moore and Anderson 2003; Dale 2006; also Creanga 2010; Creanga and Smit 2014). After his crucifixion and resurrection, the Greek title ‘Christ’ (Christos) for Messiah was added to his name. More than a Jewish teacher and prophet, Jesus Christ became seen as God himself: God incarnate in a human body. The biblical God became flesh, embodied in the man Jesus. The Church fathers wrestled with the mystery of incarnation (literally, en-flesh-ment) in increasingly abstract theological debates about the Trinity (Father-Son-Spirit) and Christology (the nature of Christ) (see, for example, Burrus 2000). They affirmed in the Nicene Creed (325 C.E.) that Jesus Christ was of one substance with God, at once fully divine and fully human.

For Christians, incarnational faith opens the possibility of experiencing the divine presence at work in the human body (Miles 2005). The linking of the human and the divine echoes the goodness of creation that is repeatedly affirmed in the Genesis account of creation: ‘And God saw it was good’ (Genesis 1). The failure of the first humans to live up to this goodness, according to the biblical account, problematised body and desire. The mission of Jesus Christ was interpreted as a promise for undoing the sins of the ‘old Adam’. Regarding Christian masculine identity, the belief that God became incarnate in a male saviour figure (rather than in a ‘female’ body) had two lasting consequences: First, men could argue theologically for their privileged position within the emerging church, rationalising the exclusivity of the male clergy and papacy on the grounds of Christ’s maleness. Second, in order to approximate the vexing mystery of Christ incarnate, Christian men began to discipline their bodies and passions through ascetic and monastic practices. Submitting to the virtue of chastity—building on the Greek philosophical tradition of enkrateia, the self-controlling of one’s passions—they hoped to imitate what was conceived