Gender, Body & Sexuality

Proceedings of the Annual Graduate Interdisciplinary Conference, held in Montreal, Quebec; March 3rd 2016.

The *Proceedings of the Annual Graduate Interdisciplinary Conference (PAGIC)* is proudly produced in collaboration with the *Journal of Religion and Culture* (JRC) and the graduate students from the Department of Religions and Cultures at Concordia University.

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Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec.

ISSN 1198-6395
Journal of Religion and Culture - Volume 26, no. 3 (2017)

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AGIC logo design: Jesse Toufexis and Josiah Toufexis
Book design: Joseph E. Brito
The type face of this journal is Minion Pro,
designed by Robert Slimbach,
issued as a digital Open Type font
by Adobe Systems, Mountain View California, 2000.

JRC | Religion & Culture

Volume 26, no. 3

Content

Dressing the Savior

Considering a New Notion of Gender Theory Through the Feminized Body of Christ

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Abstract

Is there a way to attend to the particularity of Christ's body without exalting male flesh and codifying the gender binary? Can Christ's flesh function as a site that encompasses all of humanity's multi-faceted and endlessly expressed gender while simultaneously queering gender in ways that preclude the possibility of it settling into new forms of hierarchy? While it is necessary to affirm the particularity of Christ (in his gender, Jewishness, historical existence, etc.), it need not follow that Christ's sex or gender was limited as male. Indeed Jesus confounds the traditional separation of sexes, embodying and dancing between male and female in both biological sex and gender. Through this queering of gender and his position as the New Adam, Jesus undermines the determinacy of a gender binary and the hierarchy of a one-gender theory. This essay will proceed with an analysis of the biological and social ways in which Jesus confounds gender, paying special attention to medieval references to the womb of Christ. It will then demonstrate how Jesus, as the New Adam, must necessarily represent all genders and therefore destabilizes attempts to settle gender in ways that make it vulnerable to oppression or hierarchical ordering. In this way, Christ's salvific work is gender trouble.

When I was a little girl my mother would occasionally attempt to put dresses on me for church. This did not go over well. I still struggle to articulate the sensation in my gut when I would put one on, attempting to placate her. I was not the *kind* of female my sister or my mother were. Terms like "tom boy" got tossed around, but these didn't fit either. There was no place or words for me to articulate where I fit. I suppose this was, in a way, the precursor to my frustration with gender theories and the gender binary in particular. Where did I fit within these categories? And if I didn't fit, how many others were left trying to squeeze themselves into categories that "fit" about as well as my childhood dresses?

We need a new configuration for understanding gender and one that accounts for the richness and diversity of humanity. As a Christian theologian, I have attempted to continue what is already a long and rich conversation in my tradition by way of a discussion Christ's own gender and its theological ramifications. Perhaps in the One that connects us to our Creator, who embodies humanity fully, we will find the resources for articulating a vision of gender that opens up spaces for gender expression rather than closing it down. For this reason and as part of this endeavor, I offer this brief journey into reexamining Christ's gender in order to consider its potential implications for our own complex gender identities.

While it is necessary to affirm the particularity of Christ (in his gender, Jewishness, historical existence, etc.), it need not follow that Christ's sex or gender was limited to male.[1] Indeed Jesus confounds the traditional separation of sexes, embodying and dancing between male and female in both biological sex and gender. Through this queering of gender, Jesus undermines the determinacy of a gender binary and the hierarchy of a one-gender theory. This essay will proceed with an analysis of the biological and performative ways in which Jesus confounds gender, paying special attention to medieval references to the maternal body of Christ. It will then demonstrate how the theological conception of Jesus foreshadows all genders and therefore destabilizes attempts to settle gender in ways that make it vulnerable to oppression or hierarchical ordering.

Confounding (Destabilizing) Gender

Though scripture clearly refers to Jesus as masculine, his biological and gendered maleness is not quite so settled. The Gospel of Matthew details Jesus' lineage from Abraham to Joseph, the husband of Mary. What is curious about this is that Jesus is not *biologically* related to Joseph. Already there is a new kind of familial and social binding happening. Jesus is grafted into Joseph's lineage in what could be considered a foreshadowing of the Gentiles' own future incorporation. Yet how does Joseph's adoption of Jesus affect Jesus' maleness? The answer is twofold: lacking a human father puts Jesus' genetic makeup as "male" under pressure and adopting an "illegitimate" child as the firstborn son already disrupted typical gender norms in a pattern that would continue throughout Jesus' life.

The absence of a human father destabilizes Jesus' maleness in ways that provide productive openings for notions of gender. In his phenomenal essay, "The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ," Graham Ward expounds this further. He posits,

> The specificity of Jesus' male body is made unstable from the beginning This is made manifest by the absence (in Matthew and Luke) of a male progenitor…The nature of paternity is

> redefined—Ephesians 3:14-15—in a way which points up the inseparability of what Judith Butler calls 'bodies that matter' from a doctrine of creation. The XY chromosomal maleness of Jesus Christ issues from the XX chromosomal femaleness of his mother as miracle, and so this male body is unlike any other male body to date. Its materiality is, from its conception, unstable; though, with the circumcision, its specifically sexed nature is affirmed.[2]

Thus, while the specifically sexed nature of Jesus' maleness is affirmed at circumcision (there had to be something to circumcise!), it is also put under pressure by virtue of it being a chromosomal "miracle." Maleness in Christ is opened up in ways that allow it to be nuanced as something slightly different (or perhaps something more?). These deviations from what is common extend into the performative ways in which Jesus disrupted gender norms.

Joseph's acceptance of Jesus as his firstborn son marks the beginning of many departures from traditional performances of masculinity. Joseph not only risks being interpreted as weak and failing to properly rule his household, but also the possibility of not securing his "actual" familial line.[3] Jesus interrupts Joseph's lineage and defers the possibility of its continuation. Already patriarchy as the absolute order and rule of society is being challenged. Jesus' own life and actions continued this dance between being male and deviating from its "appropriate" expression.

In both his life and his teachings, Jesus fails to conform to typical gender patterns and fundamentally challenged the male responsibility to the household. Rather than marrying and accepting his role as patriarch, Jesus remains single and travels about the country with twelve young men. Much as he had disrupted his own father's household, Jesus disrupted the supreme rule of the patriarchal household by cracking it open in ways that formed new modes of relating and family structures. Not only did he leave his own household without reproducing another, but he also transferred the logic of household into a spiritual register. This is the kind of work Jesus accomplishes when he says, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" and then transfers the familial relation to his disciples saying, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."[4] This destabilizing of gender and its performances extends to Jesus' own body as well.

One of the most provocative stories in which Jesus' body misaligns with the concurrent understandings of gender is the account of the woman with perpetual bleeding in Mark 5. A brief account of perceptions of gender will

elucidate the gendered elements within this passage. Within first century medical theory, the body's vulnerability to disease was proportional to its porosity. New Testament scholar Candida Moss elaborates this theory, "Boundaries must be regulated and checked and invaders must be fended off. Sickly bodies were those that failed in this effort to remain impermeable. They were porous, and it was this porosity that permitted a *daimon* or other agent to enter and contaminate the body."[5] This porosity mapped directly onto gender. Following medical scholar Galen's theories of gender, women were perceived as "colder…moist, squishy, and porous."[6] Scholar of late antiquity Peter Brown explains further, "Women, by contrast, were failed males. The precious vital heat had not come to them in sufficient quantities in the womb. Their lack of heat made them more soft, more liquid, clammy-cold, altogether more formless than were men. Periodic menstruation showed that their bodies could not burn up the heavy surpluses that coagulated within them."[7] Though men were considered inherently warmer and more formed, they were not "safe" from becoming "womanish." Indeed, their "flickering heat was an uncertain force." [8] In response to this ever-present threat, men performed and cultivated hardness and control in all their actions. Again, Brown elaborates, "It was never enough to be male: a man had to strive to remain 'virile.' He had to learn to exclude from his character and from the poise and temper of his body all telltale traces of 'softness' that might betray, in him, the half-formed state of a woman."[9] It is only the feminine or effeminate body that is leaky and violate-able. Porosity then, or any indication of it, indexed a distinctly female characteristic. This provides critical background for understanding the implications of Jesus' interaction with the bleeding woman.

Within this context, the woman's condition indicates an overly porous and therefore weak and womanish body. Moss observes, "The very nature of the woman's illness is that her body lacks the appropriate boundaries and unnaturally leaks its contents into the world. The image of the prolonged and abnormal twelve-year flow of blood suggests both the sodden malleability of the suffering body and her hyperhydrated feminine identity."[10] It is not only the woman, however, that reveals her porosity. Jesus also experiences an unexpected and unwarranted flow within the story as the woman touches him. He begins leaking just as she ceases. Moss describes this flow as not simply a spiritual movement, but a physiological one,

> Like the woman, Jesus is unable to control the flow that emanates from his body. Like the flow of blood, the flow of power is something embodied and physical; just as the woman feels the flow of blood dry up, so Jesus feels—physically—the flow of power leave his body. Both the diseased woman with the flow of blood and the divine protagonist of mark are porous, leaky creatures.[11]

Thus, Jesus once again disturbs typical gender norms. The Gospel of Mark depicts a Savior who is "weak and sickly…unable to control, regulate or harden his porous body."[12] Moreover, it is a *female* who exerts power over his body, extracting healing power out of him. Maud Gleason describes the implications of this leaky and violatable body,

> What Jesus clearly did not control was the boundaries of his own body…The *only* thing the Gospel narrative tell us about Jesus' body is that it was thus violated. This issue is explored by both Glancy and Frillingos, who writes: "The breached body, male or female, was 'feminine' or 'effeminate.'"[13]

Despite his physical anatomy, Jesus demonstrates repeatedly a gendered fluidity in his body that troubles the waters of patriarchal understandings of gender. This is expounded even further in scripture's description of Christ as the final or second Adam.[14]

The Second Adam and His Womb

Attention to the comparison between Jesus and Adam has largely focused on the theological and salvific grounds of what Christ has accomplished for humanity. What if this comparison, however, extends to Christ's sexed embodiment of humanity? In his essay, "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," Wayne Meeks describes how interpretations of a dual sexed Adam (pre-Eve) were common in antiquity. He notes,

> Myths of a bisexual progenitor of the human race were very common in antiquity, as they have been in many cultures. For anyone trying to understand the strange sequence of the first two chapters of Genesis without the aid of modern source criticism, it would have been very plausible to read such a myth into the text."[15]

Meeks draws this directly into the Christian tradition stating, "Rabbis in early Talmudic times knew a text of the Septuagint which translated Gen. 1:27 and 5:2, 'male and female he created *him*,'" or more literally, "a male with corresponding female parts created He him."[16] On the terms of this alternative translation , the creation of Eve becomes a literal dividing of the human into multiple sexes. This interpretation of the Genesis has very interesting implications for our interpretation of Christ as the New Adam. If Christ's body also holds multiple sexes, how can Christian theology affirm a simple gender binary? If Christ does not embody any clear gender distinction, how can Christian communities claim this figure as a justification for gender hierarchy based on "natural order"? This is not to imply that biology or gender is legitimated by the specificity of Christ's body—that sexual fluidity required a sexually fluid savior. Rather,

the cleanly divided biological lines of gender and sex are destabilized in Jesus' body, teaching us that we must attend to the *person* of Christ to understand what s/he does with gender, how Jesus transforms it, and how understandings of sex must be placed into the context of Christ's person. These implications can be further illuminated when we pair this alternative translation with the medieval conceptions of Jesus as having a womb in his side. A closer look at a few of these texts will enlighten this point.

Among several twelfth century Cistercian monks who write about God and/or Christ having a womb is Guerric abbot of Igny who perceived the wound in Jesus' side at crucifixion as a kind of womb, welcoming souls and uniting them with the divine. Caroline Bynum describes Igny as "fascinated by images of pregnancy and of the womb."[17] She translates him, "He [God the father] draws them [the wretched] into his very bowels and makes them his members. He could not bind us to himself more closely, could not make us more intimate to himself than by incorporating us into himself."[18] Or even more explicitly,

> He [Christ] is the cleft rock…do not fly only to him but into him…For in his loving kindness and his compassion he opened his side in order that the blood of the wound by give you life, the warmth of his body revive you, the breath of his heart flow into you…There you will lie hidden in safety…There you will certainly not freeze, since in the bowels of Christ charity does not grow cold."[19]

Eugene Rogers cites him even more extensively, explaining that for Guerric, "Christ's body becomes a tissue of openings, an aperture to the Trinity, a way in. Guerric insists that this entering into Christ is not merely a clinging 'to' him. It is important to him that Christ has an accessible *interior*."[20] This interior is located in the openings of Jesus' body, particularly in the wounds. Guerric writes, "For the wound in the side of Christ, what is it if not an entrance into the ark of salvation in the face of the flood?"[21] These openings are not simple entryways, however, but carry strong connotations of the womb.[22] On this point, Rogers notes, "Christ is entered through a wound in a Latin in which *vulnerra* and *vulva* are not that far apart, whether in imagery or in language."[23] A contemporary of Guerric, Aalred of Rievaulx takes this notion even further and alludes to Christ's blood as a kind of nourishing breast milk.

Aalred also describes flying into the womb of Christ, being protected, united and nourished by Jesus' body. Within Aalred's poetry, Christ's blood becomes wine and the water from his crucifixion wound becomes milk.[24] Aalred writes,

> Hasten, linger not, eat the honeycomb with your honey, drink your wine with your milk. The blood is changed into wine to gladden you, the water into milk to nourish you. From the rock streams have flowed for you, wounds have been made in his limbs, holes in the wall of his body, in which, like a dove, you made hide while you kiss them one by one. Your lips, stained with blood, will become like a scarlet ribbon and your word sweet.[25]

Interpreting water or blood from Christ's wound as breast milk is not as far fetched as it may sound to the modern reader. In medieval medical theory breast milk was believed to be processed blood.[26] The maternal body figures strongly into medieval conceptions of Christ and Christ's salvific work. Featuring Jesus as a maternal figure who nourishes young believers with his body undermines any notions of a hyper-masculine God who dominates his creation, and thereby justifies gendered domination as a legitimate form of relationship.

Conceiving of Jesus as possessing female anatomy (even if only allegorically or mythically) contributes strongly to Christ's queering and unsettling of the gendered and sexed body. It becomes even more provocative when brought into conversation with Adam as an androgyne. If Eve is taken from the side of androgynous Adam and Christ is the New Adam, Christ's side revealing a womb is not surprising. The womb is already present—merely revealed by the wound in Christ's side.[27] In fact, the two *should* harken to one another! The impossibility of Eve being taken from Adam echoes the impossibility of a womb in a male body, the unfathomability of a god being crucified by humans. Here we have *all* of humanity on the cross and in such a way that it can only be described as miracle. Yet again, Christ sways between conceptions of male and female in ways that defy our ability to settle or determine him (or should we say her?). In short, if Eve was taken from Adam's side, then should not "Eve" also reside in Christ's side?

Readers may get confused at this point as to how Jesus' sex can be established. (Certainly the wound cannot be a *literal* vagina!) Yet perhaps this consternation is exactly the point. Christ both confounds and encompasses gender in such a way that it cannot be separated into easily distinguishable genders or sexes. Both sex and gender now exist in Jesus' body in a way that prefigures the vast array of these combinations within all of humanity. In this way, Jesus defies and confounds categories (both of one sex gender theories and gender binary theories). Yet how can we affirm this while also affirming the very particularity required for a complete identification with humanity fully in history? Perhaps our answer must be a kind of theological affirmation, one akin to our other affirmations of the

mysteries of God. If confessing Christians can affirm that Jesus was both fully God and fully human, perhaps they can also affirm that Jesus was both fully male and fully female.

This simultaneous destabilization and incorporation of all gender and sexes in Jesus' body proves immensely helpful in undermining the hierarchy and oppression to which sex and gender are often vulnerable. Gender hierarchy is undone from the inside out in this all-sexed Creator Savior who fails at being "properly" masculine, but also fails at having female anatomy. As Jesus' body ebbs and flows between feminine and masculine, male and female, it precludes the possibility of a divinely ordained order of one over the other. If male cannot rule unquestioned in Jesus' own body, how can it be assumed as the natural or superior leader in those communities that take Jesus as their moral and spiritual exemplar? Furthermore, the fluidity Jesus demonstrates in gender indexes the infinite variety of human gender and sexuality. As argued above, Jesus does not encapsulate fully either masculinity or femininity. In this way, he demonstrates in his own body a flux in gender that resists categorization. Thus, both gender binaries and one-gender theories are put under pressure.[28] Is it possible that the very impetus to formulate a gender theory that provides sufficient categories is itself what leads to structures of inclusion/exclusion and hierarchical ordering? What if the way in which Jesus confounds expectations of gender and sex is itself an invitation to relinquish our own desires to settle or qualify gender/sex/sexuality etc.? This would by no means limit or negate particularity, but would rather open it up to boundless expression, infinite articulation.

Conclusion

The diversity and infinite expression of gender found in this understanding of Christ's life opens up a new way of thinking of gender identity in ways that are open to continual queering. Humans can retain the particularity of their bodies and how they identify (e.g., sex, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) without needing to conform to a set of categories. It is not that the categories need to be expanded; they need to be undone. This is what is accomplished in the body of Christ and his incorporation of humans into the divine life. Furthermore, the relationality within this model precludes the possibility of categorical exclusion and even oppressive hierarchy. Perhaps now, the little girl who could not wear a dress can simply declare, "I'm not that kind of female!" or even more simply, "That's not who I am." In his gender-full body, Christ has shut down the theological justification for violently forcing people into categories that limit and negate who they actually are. Doesn't this sound more like the infinite, creative God Christians claim to worship?

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Endnotes

1. Though this paper will largely refer to gender (as in socially conditioned expression of biological sex), it will occasionally also address biological sex. At points the terms are brought together or become interchangeable. Though this is often interpreted as error, I contend that it is actually part of the very confounding of gender that Christ performs.
2. Graham Ward, "The Displaced Body of Christ," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1998), 164.
3. Peter Brown describes a similar performance of masculinity in his seminal book, *The Body & Society: Men, Women, & Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. He notes, "Married concord [communicated] a message of benign order that spilled, quite naturally, from its domest setting into the public sphere. A man who had 'harmonized' his domestic life with such elegance and authority could be trusted to 'harmonize state, forum and friends'" (14). (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
4. Matthew 12:48-50. Jesus also disrupts the patriarchal ordering of relations when he responds to the Sadducees regarding the woman who had been married to seven brothers. His answer that "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage" rejects the current power of relations in which women are "given" in marriage. A new mode of sociability is being instantiated through the body and teachings of Christ.
5. Candida Moss, "Man with the Flow of Power," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no 3 (2010): 513.
6. Ibid., 513.
7. Brown, 10.
8. Ibid., 11.
9. Ibid., 11.
10. Moss, 514.
11. Ibid., 516.
12. Ibid., 516.
13. Maud Gleason, "By Whose Gender Standards (If Anybody's) Was Jesus A Real Man?" in *New Testament Masculinities*, edited by Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson, no 45 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature), 326.
14. 1 Cor. 15:45 (NIV)
15. Wayne Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," in *History of Religions*, Vol 13, no 3 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 185.
16. Meeks, 185.
17. Caroline Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1984), 121.
18. Ibid., 121.
19. Ibid., 121-122.
20. Eugene F. Rogers, *After the Spirit (Radical Traditions)* (Grand Rapids:

William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 123.

21. Ibid., 123.
22. Bynum provides the context to her citations of Guerric noting that he "explicitly associates heart and womb and produces a bizarre description of the soul as a child incorporated into the bowels of God the father" (121).
23. Rogers, 120.
24. Bynum, 123.
25. Ibid., 123.
26. Ibid., 132.
27. The revealing of the womb (rather than the creation of it by the spear piercing Jesus' side) is a critical point. If the spear *creates* the womb in Jesus' side, we are left with yet another understanding of femaleness existing only response to maleness. Luce Irigaray develops this strongly in *Speculum of the Other Woman* and with her notion of "envelope" in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Femaleness cannot be conceived of in terms of lack, what penetrates it, or what it houses. It must exist within its own right. Theologically then, Christ must *already* possess the (allegorical) features of femaleness prior to the wound. Irigaray, *Speculum* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1985) Irigaray, *Ethics* (Ithica: Corness University Press, 1993).
28. Jesus is not "properly" male or female (binary). Neither is he female *becoming* male (one-gender theory).