

**Conflicting religious ideals of masculinity:
On Godmen and male eunuchs**

“Religion and Gender: Gender Democracy in multi-religious Europe“

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My presentation focuses on the intertwinement of gender and religion. It deals with the religious imagination and religious discourse, but not with congregational life in the countries of the EU. Consequently, the question of a practical and political applicability is less central to the arguments presented in this essay. Instead, it should be understood as a productive irritation that also aims at shattering preconceived images and attitudes relating to the terms of “religion” and “gender”. We should not only read *religion* through the critical lens of gender research (where, in most cases, a one-sided image of traditional religion and church prevails), but we can also question the concept of *gender* from a religious perspective. I will therefore begin with a few thoughts on religious fundamentalism that seeks to establish and restore traditional gender roles. I will then illustrate the broad range of religious gender models by way of an example taken from early Christianity. Here, the focus will be on the construction and ideals of masculinity.

The fundamentalist challenge

The social and economic global restructuring and its concomitant conflicts have unsettled heterosexual men and have led to their protest against the real and supposed changes in power relations and authoritative claims. Religion, already declared dead by modernity, is assuming an increasingly important role in the protest of men against perceived threats to their identity.

This can lead to rather odd phenomena, such as the recent divisions within the Episcopal

Church (the Anglican Church in the United States). Individual American congregations have split from their dioceses and placed themselves under the guidance of archconservative bishops in Africa. These bishops promise to preserve (or, rather, reintroduce) patriarchal values, which assign traditional roles to men and women, and they preach compulsory heterosexual monogamy. The division within the Anglican Church was triggered by disagreements over the consecration of women and gay bishops.

As in the case of the Episcopal Church, conservative and fundamentalist congregations mainly focus on questions of religious lifestyle. Theological, dogmatic differences that have characterized European church history are of little interest to them. A narrowing of perspective to practical aspects of religious life – to a “legalistic ethical rigorism” (Riesebrodt) – is an important feature of fundamentalist movements within the world religions of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism. For this reason, American scholarly literature refers to an *orthopraxis* among fundamentalists rather than an *orthodoxy*. What is important to them is the focus on a “straight practice” of piety. In doing so, they are creating a theocentric view of the world (with the exception of Hinduism), they resist being absorbed by secular humanism by claiming their own “totality” (all-engulfing worldview), and they seek to renew values they perceive as eternally valid.

The global spread of religious fundamentalism is a response to the instability and crisis that modernity with its secularist belief in progress has triggered among large portions of the population. However, fundamentalism must also be seen as an attempt to remasculinise religion and re-patriarchalise society. In spite of all the differences that exist within fundamentalist movements, they widely agree on gender issues, especially when it comes to pushing women out of public life. One such example within the fundamentalist branches of Islam - John Esposito correctly suggests to substitute the term “fundamentalism” for “Islamic revivalism” - is the increasingly strict interpretation of the Sharia, especially with respect to punishing adultery. Other examples include the local initiatives of the national-religious Hindutva movement in India that want to reintroduce *sati*, i.e. the practice of widowed women being burned on their husbands’ pyre (such as the infamous case of Roop Kanwar in Rajasthan in 1987). Among the list of extreme examples, we can also name American

fundamentalist Christian groups, who either set fire to abortion clinics (like radical elements within the anti-abortion group *Operation Rescue*) or call for the stoning of homosexuals and adulterers (like representatives of *Dominion Theology*). Among fundamentalist Jewish groups, ultra-orthodox Jews (*haredim*) adhere to strict gender separation, a practice less strictly observed by Israel's religiously active Gush Emunim, the settler movement. It can therefore be argued that fundamentalism offers roles to women and men that are touted as being eternally valid and traditional while they are, at the same time, new creations in response to modernity. In the American literature, the term *traditioning* (Richard Antoun) has been used to describe this phenomenon – an active response to modernity with recourse to the fiction of a stable and sacred “golden age”. An excellent study conducted by Saba Mahmood demonstrates such ambiguity in the case of women's active participation in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

Fundamentalism is, in fact, an extraordinarily dynamic movement. Contrary to popular opinion, it is not religious traditionalism but a product of modernity that perceives itself as a counter-movement to the secularist belief in progress. Today, we know that religious protests against secularism emerged almost simultaneously in different parts of the world around the 1920s. In the US, where conservative, para-denominational congregations applied the term “fundamentalism” to themselves, the protest was directed against secular humanism, the teaching of evolution and the reputed moral decay. In Islam, the protest became, in addition to the list above, also a struggle to overcome Westernisation / *Westoxification* (once colonialism, now globalisation), while in India the idea of setting up a religious, political and national Hindu hegemony took roots at the same time. Between 1920 and 1940 – that is about the same period as in the United States - Hassan-al-Banna and Sayyid Mawdudi formulated their protests in Egypt and Pakistan respectively; in India men like Savakar, Hedgewar and Golwakar did the same for Hinduism. Bruce Lawrence, an American religious studies scholar, claims that the driving force behind religious fundamentalism comes from a “secondary male elite“, that is, from men who – based on their education and class status – could belong to the elite, but who – for social and political reasons as well as for reasons of their religious convictions – do not have their hands on the levers of power in modern, secular society. Martin Riesebrödt, a German scholar working in the US, refers to such men

as a “new religious elite of proletaroid intellectuals”.

Generally speaking, it can be said that there is a preference for “masculinity” in all three monotheistic religions: Their founders, prophets and messianic holy figures are all male; and wherever women have played, and still play, an important role, their history has been largely forgotten or suppressed. With regard to Christian theology and the church, for instance, it is of significance that God revealed Godself to humanity by becoming incarnate in a man’s body – which is directly reflected, for example, in legitimating the prohibition to ordain women. In Islam, the masculinity of the prophet is also important (although Muhammad, in contrast to Jesus Christ, was never vested with divine features or a divine nature). The *revivalist* Mawdudi, for example – who initially argued against the foundation of an independent Pakistani nation state but later contributed to the Islamisation of the same state – claimed that an Islamic head of state had to be a man.

Modern-day church crisis

Contrary to the beliefs of traditionalists (as currently represented in the Vatican or in Saudi-Arabian Wahhabism) and of fundamentalists, religious traditions offer a broad range of gender roles and multiple ideals of masculinity. All it takes is the courage to look for them and to name them. Below, I will illustrate this by using an example from early Christianity. First, though, I need to say a few words about modernity.

On the one hand, alternative ideals of masculinity that developed in Christianity (e.g. monastic communities, wandering preachers, eunuchs) have been practiced time and again and were inspired by the power of the religious imagination. On the other hand, they have also been met with scepticism: Religious authorities accused them of heresy, and secular elites accused them of feminisation or even hidden sodomy due to their homosociality. In modernity, time-tested, traditional-religious models went out of fashion, among other reasons because respect, power and authority were increasingly found in the secular realm rather than in ecclesiastic contexts. Religious matters were assigned to the private sphere. With the awakening of the idea of nation states, with colonial expansionism and a seemingly

unstoppable technical progress, more “manly” (i.e. more belligerent, national and heroic) ideals of masculinity were needed. Religious sentimentality was considered to be something private, soft or even neurotic (as reflected in the thoughts of people ranging from Friedrich Nietzsche to the American pragmatic Williams James).

In modernity, repeated attempts were made to re-masculinise church life. “Where are the men in church?” is, therefore, a *modern* question. In order to stop the alleged decay of public morality, Christian men’s movements reverted to martial and national virtues (this applies to the phenomena of the English *Muscular Christianity* as much as to German Catholic “Männerapostolat” founded in 1910 as well as to the German Protestant “Männerdienst” founded in 1915). Only recently, a Christian men’s movement emerged in the United States called *GodMen* or *Men’s Fraternity*. This is a forum where men meet outside of the church in order to liberate themselves from the burden of – as they claim – a “feminised church”. Men go out together to play *paintball*, they retreat to the wilderness over the weekend and attend events where eloquent charismatic speakers confirm their masculinity. Spokesmen of the movement claim that the Jesus preached in regular churches is domesticated, trivialised and emasculated, although it was HE who, with his well-built manly body, unwaveringly cleansed the temple, conquered the desert and preferred the harsh life on the streets. Bunches of flowers, holding hands, pointless Christian drivel about love – how would this make a man feel comfortable? The message conveyed in the church today, they claim, boils down to God creating men for the sole purpose of making them *nice guys*. In 2005, for example, Paul Coughlin published his book *No More Christian Nice Guy: When Being Nice--Instead of Good--Hurts Men, Women and Children*. Such attitude, they say, will come to an end now. Consequently, the Christian revivalist programme is described as “testosterone-friendly” (according to Rick Caldwell, director of the *Men’s Fraternity* founded in 1990).

The modern-day recourse to Christian-male virtues – the claim to a “golden age” of clear gender assignments – is largely based on a projection. It is rooted in a wishful thinking about a past in which men’s (and women’s) lives were without problems. The desire to return the manly habitus to its old and true Christian form is, after all, a product of historical fiction. It makes us forget that “manliness” – just like gender in general – has to reconstitute itself time

and time again, in a process of an intricate intertwining of past and present, of visionary ideals and social reality, of repressive norms and resistant behaviour. In contrast to the fiction of a “golden age”, a look into history will show that Christian ideals of masculinity are anything but uncomplicated. With the help of a case study, I would like to stir some curiosity for what the Christian traditions have in store.

An early Christian challenge

Roughly speaking, two visions emerged in early Christianity on how best to materialize the messages of Jesus and Paul. On the one hand, the settled movement of householders arose comprising those who intended to continue the patriarchal *oikonomia* and thus establish conservative rules for the coexistence of man and woman, master and servant. On the other hand, an ascetic movement came to existence that was far more experimental due to its attempts at imitating Jesus and due to its eschatological expectations - that is, the expectation that the world as we know it would come to an end soon. New ideals of masculinity were invented and explored, such as martyrs, celibates, desert fathers, stylites, eunuchs, wandering bands (including mixed gender groups) or same-sex monastic communities. Through new body disciplines, to which people subjected themselves voluntarily, new male virtues developed, such as humility and modesty.

To give you an example:* In the vita of St. Paul of Thebes from the fourth century, the church father Jerome imagined the following eroticised scene: Instead of suffering the pains of torture, a young martyr in the prime of his masculinity is punished by being led into a lovely garden where he is forced to lie down on a bed of soft feathers. Surrounded by roses and lilies, a warm wind and the gentle murmur of a nearby brook, he is tied up with garlands so that he cannot escape. Out of the blue, a beautiful prostitute appears and joins him. Jerome describes how the woman starts cuddling and embracing the young martyr. Her tender gestures are just the beginning: She fondles his member and he becomes sexually aroused. Then she throws herself onto him. The young ascetic, tied up as he is, is about to lose his chastity. As *miles Christi* (soldier of Christ), he would have been able to endure the pain of

physical torture, but is he able to resist sexual temptation? Is he able to conquer the budding lust through impotence or the deliberate deflation of his penis? When the woman tries to kiss him, he bites off his tongue and spits it into her face.

This story is a hagiography, a legend, and not a historical account. It demonstrates a new masculine ideal acquired through a new “Christian” body language. At first glance, the text seems to confirm merely the modern *GodMen’s* fear of the feminisation of their environment: The youth would have preferred to endure torture rather than being exposed to a sexually active woman. Of course, this text is hostile to women. The woman in the heavenly garden is Eve, the seducer, a whore; she does not possess her own subjectivity. To a certain extent, the text is also hostile to the human body. The young ascetic is able to control the lust he feels only through the pain of apparent self-mutilation.

But this is not the text’s only message. The church father Jerome seduces his readers by taking them to the fantasy world of soft porn, only to confront them with a surprising twist at the end. The young ascetic conquers his lust through pain; the (male) reader’s imagination is abruptly sobered by the image of a bloody tongue.

The ascetic martyr is sexually virile but remains “blameless”. He understands the sexual language of his body. Although seducible, he must not succumb to seduction or else, lose his masculinity. If he were to succumb to sexual lust, it would not serve as proof of his manliness but signify the loss of an ideal celibate masculinity. Being shackled, he cannot even resist his sexual seducer verbally. Therefore, he spits the instrument of speech into the face of the woman – his tongue.

In psychoanalytical terms, one might interpret the story as self-castration: Through an act of oedipal or narcissistic destruction, the youth emasculates himself in the heavenly garden of lust. He loses his tongue, the symbol of his potency. However, this interpretation falls short: The young ascetic does not really castrate himself but, instead, emasculates himself twice. First, he refuses to perform a sexual act despite his arousal; second, he destroys his ability to speak and can thus no longer pursue his missionary task. As preacher or apostle, he has

become a mute - only his body can serve as testimony. However, in this double emasculation (his refusal to perform a sexual act / the destruction of his ability to speak) he does not lose his masculinity but rather gains it. This might be the real message of this legend.

The emasculating, though non-castrating youth of Jerome is very much keeping in sink with the ambiguity of other Latin Church fathers, who almost unanimously condemn physical castration. They argue *against* physical but *for* symbolic castration, as exemplified in Christian eunuchs. The church fathers turned the cultic and sacred position of the Hellenistic eunuch into a spiritual metaphor. Metaphorically speaking, a celibate Christian man was a eunuch; anatomically speaking, however, he remained intact as a man. By rejecting real (i.e. castrated) eunuchs, the church fathers followed Roman law that prohibited castration within the borders of the Empire. Some patristic texts, however, provide evidence that, despite this ban, some Christians turned themselves into eunuchs by voluntarily castrating themselves. For the sake of the kingdom of heaven, “they have made themselves eunuchs”, says the gospel of Matthew (Mt. 19, 12). It is difficult to reconstruct what exactly motivated these Christian men to perform such drastic physical measures. Their own words have not been passed on in the patristic texts. It is conceivable that these men were attracted by the aura of sacredness or the ambivalent gender identity attributed to eunuchs. It is also conceivable that they hoped to resolve the problem of sexuality through an anatomical intervention. They wanted to return to a state of innocence – maybe to the paradisaical androgyny before the Fall – or they longed for the restoration of the angelic existence of the original human being.

Whatever the case may be, a eunuch transgressed the physical boundaries of what constitutes a “man” and thus demonstrated the possibility of transcending the biological body and liberating himself from sexual imprisonment. Hence, the youth as imagined by Jerome is not only a soldier of Christ who, strengthened by his male virtue, is able to tolerate any pain (the anticipated torture / the bitten off tongue), but also a male eunuch who has learned to resist sexual stimulation of his body without having to castrate himself.

Such a man is useless for a heterosexual partnership. Whether as lover, husband or father, he is unable to fulfil any normative roles. However, he is also neither a cowboy nor a legionary

or a consumer of Viagra. If Jerome's hagiography were to address our post-modern times, then perhaps in the following words: In order to escape the phallic one-dimensionality of the male body, a man must sometimes bite off his own tongue - he deprives himself of the language he has acquired. Only through this loss might it be possible for a man to experience his male identity differently and anew.

The American *GodMen* would not be able to make heads or tails of what I have just presented. They rely on a rough male terminology: swearwords and curses, crude jokes and a *no-nonsense* diction. Their missionary enthusiasm in favour of a testosterone-friendly men's culture, which claims to know who men "really" are, is based on a fear that the allegedly feminised culture today deprives men of their true nature. *GodMen*, or so it seems, are the *milites Christi* (soldiers of Christ) of the twenty first century. Given their self-centredness, however, they actually look more like a patriarchal Christian horde of men that remains caught in the web of post-modernity's self-help culture.

In distinction to such modern men's movements, some spiritual male practices in early Christianity attest to how willing men would have to become to learn about their bodies' limitations in order to achieve transcendence. For secular men today, their visions of a manly life are alien, discomfiting and uncanny. But they are also not in conformity with fundamentalist family values. These early Christian texts demonstrate how much effort it would take for men to liberate themselves from normative role expectations. The hagiography by Jerome can be considered a bold outline of a complicated, alternative and theologised eroticism of "Gottesnähe" (proximity to the divine). Such buried constructions of masculinity can be found in the traditions of the world religions – beyond the narrow-mindedness of traditionalists and beyond fundamentalist misappropriations.

Outlook

After my lecture, someone in the audience asked the legitimate question whether there was anything emancipatory in what I had presented. As I had mentioned at the outset, my interpretation of this hagiography has no direct practical value. Instead, it should encourage

people to grant more space to the religious imagination in public debates about gender, a dimension that religious fundamentalists as well as mainstream denominations tend to neglect. I nevertheless would like to respond briefly to this question.

- First, the fundamentalist protest against modernity does not contain any emancipatory elements in the sense of gender mainstreaming and gender equity. But – as a dynamic movement – fundamentalism also experiments with gender, even though neither fundamentalists themselves nor their opponents can admit to it. Mainstream denominations, in turn, have difficulties to explain fully why men no longer attend church, since the current church reality itself is an expression of the crisis religious life is experiencing in modernity.
- Second, these observations leave a slightly bitter, pessimistic taste, especially so long as we remain caught in a worldview centred on progress. We live in a historical moment that could be called “non-utopian”. After the ideological age of the twentieth century, there is currently a lack of social utopias. In their stead, religious visions with a fundamentalist touch fill the utopian need. Liberal democracies, in turn, work with guidelines, approaches, measures, indicators, administered dreams, bureaucracies – whether they are able to contain fears and stir up hopes is still open to debate. Therefore, it is unreasonable to expect quantum leaps in the debate surrounding religion and male gender. An a-synchronicity continues to exist between men and women with regard to their consciousness of their own gender specificity. This is why I suggest a “policy of small steps”.
- Third, my interpretation of Jerome’s hagiography is one of these small steps. This text describes an act of a man’s voluntary destruction of his ability to speak. The cause and legitimisation of this act (i.e. seduction through a sexualized fictional woman) are no longer acceptable by today’s standards. Yet, the voluntary deprivation of speech contains a piece of emancipatory imagery: In order for men to become aware of their own crisis, it is deemed advisable not to offer prompt and eloquent solutions. We cannot pretend as if we already knew where the path should lead us, or as if the only remaining task were to cut a strategic path through the jungle of accumulated gender constructions and confusions. Interpreting the spitting out of the tongue as a metaphor

for restraint and tranquillity could represent a small step toward improving communication between the genders.

- Fourth, I would like to point out that the Christian idea of incarnation resists any simple dualism. The early Christian ascetic learned a new body language; the body was an important instrument of experience. This is true for women, too, in early Christianity who were also allowed to partake in ascetic abstinence. The desert as a spiritual place was open to them as well, although, due to the male incarnation of the divine, many obstacles were placed in their path. The intertwining of mind and body could help especially men to explore themselves and discover how strongly social norms and religiously universalised values are based on male-specific experiences.

* This version of Jerome's hagiographic account is examined in more detail in my chapter "Eunuchen oder Viagra" (Eunuchs or Viagra) in the forthcoming book *Theologie und Geschlecht. Dialoge querbeet* (eds. Heike Walz and David Plüss, 2008).

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- Global social and economic changes have led to uncertainties among heterosexual men
- Religion, already declared dead in modernity, assumes an increasingly important role in the protest of men against perceived threats to their identity
- This is reflected in the extraordinary dynamism of global religious fundamentalisms
- Fighting against secularism, the fundamentalist phenomenon can also be seen as a re-masculinization of religion and re-patriarchization of society
- Fundamentalist movements are run by a „secondary male elite“ (Bruce Lawrence) or “new religious elite of proletaroid intellectuals“ (Martin Riesebrodt)
- Religious traditions offer a broader spectrum of ideals of masculinity than acknowledged by religious traditionalists and fundamentalists
- Example: The vita of St. Paul of Thebes (a hagiography by Jerome of the 4th century)
 - An uncanny ideal of masculinity
 - A double emasculation and the „manly“ eunuch
- What does a hagiography of late antiquity have to say to a postmodern audience

