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Women as the Other Within and Towards Christianity

A Variation of Marianne Moyaert's ›History of Religionization‹

Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht von Marianne Moyaerts Studie zur Konstruktion christlicher Identität ausgehend, wie in Bezug auf die Kategorie ›Geschlecht‹ das weibliche Gegenüber analog zum religiösen Gegenüber als das Andere zum männlichen Christentum konstruiert wurde. Frauen konnten dabei jedoch aus reproduktiven Gründen nicht einfach aus der christlichen Gemeinschaft ausgeschlossen werden. Stattdessen verfolgten christliche Akteure eine doppelte Strategie: Neben dem Othering von Frauen wurde über die Konstruktion eines Ideals weiblicher Reinheit ein illusorischer Bezugspunkt weiblicher Existenz innerhalb des Christentums geschaffen. Methodisch und strukturell an Moyaerts Werk orientiert, dienen dem Beitrag Hieronymus, Johannes Meyer und Pius XI. als historische Schlaglichter zur Überprüfung der These.

Summary

Based on Marianne Moyaert's study on the construction of Christian identity, this article examines how, in relation to the category of ›gender‹, the female counterpart was constructed as the other to male Christianity, analogous to the religious counterpart as presented by Moyaert. However, women could not simply be excluded from the Christian community for reproductive reasons. Instead, Christian actors pursued a double strategy: In addition to the othering of women, an illusory point of reference for female existence within Christianity was created through the construction of an ideal of female purity. Methodologically and structurally oriented towards Moyaert's work, the article uses Jerome, John Meyer and Pius XI. as historical highlights to verify the thesis.

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History of Christianity revisited – an Introduction

When the young Maria Goretti was canonised in 1950, Pope Pius XII. followed the wishes of thousands of believers around the world, especially in Italy. After more than a decade of war, violation of human rights and decline of morals, Maria as a pure, forgiving and pious girl served as the much-needed role model to find back to the path of a God-pleasing Christian lifestyle for people all around the globe. The circumstances of Maria's death in 1902 hereby had not only a generally moral, but also an explicit gendered dimension. In the following article, Maria Goretti – along with other examples – will be presented as a typical example of Christian group formation that followed certain ideas of gender order. Methodologically, I hereby would like to venture into the experiment of transferring approaches from comparative religious studies according to Marianne Moyaert to historical studies.

With her stunning work on ›Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other. A History of Religionization‹ (see Moyaert 2024) Prof. Marianne Moyaert just published a milestone in the theological thinking on the identity of Christianity. Hereby the basis of Moyaert's understanding of religion as a construction such as gender or race barely is a surprising starting point. What rather brings a new perspective in the discussion is her approach of identifying this general construction of religion as being Christianity (see Moyaert 2024: 3) or as Bell forms it: Christianity functions as the prototype of religion in general (see Bell 2006: 28).

Trying to understand how the identification of religion and Christianity was formed in specific patterns and processes over the centuries, my contribution to the approach is how this making of religion was not only the making of it as Christian but also followed other constructing logics. Religion – in my observation – is not only identified with Christianity, but it was also historically and is till today understood by further dominant characteristics that are in fact: cis-masculinity, heterosexuality, whiteness and non-disability (just to name a few).

My short article on reflecting my reading experiences of Prof. Moyaert's *History of Religionization* tries to expand her ideas of religion as being Christian on the idea that religion is not only thought and made Christian but also white, cis-masculine, heterosexual and non-disabled. Furthermore, I argue that the strategies of othering that Moyaert impressively points out in the making of the religion Christian are used similarly in the categories mentioned above. As my research interest lies in the field, I want to exemplify this point by looking more closely at the category of gender. Following Moyaert's structure I will, firstly, define my argument more closely and, secondly, outline a long-durée approach on three flashlights on patterns of, as I will call it, gendered religionization.

1. The Male Norm – Patterns of Gendered Religionization

I argue that the process of constructing cis-male Christianity as the norm undertook two ›necessary‹ steps: In the *History of Religionization* the dynamic of othering leads to the fact that everyone that was or is not able to fulfil the requirements of Christianity was cut off and excluded to

preserve a pure Christian understanding of religion. Making religion a male Christianity, however, had to face the fact that everyone in the group of Christianity that was not male could not simply be excluded as especially women were needed to be part of Christianity – simply out of reproductive reasons.

The historization of male Christianity therefore shows two parallel dynamics: On the one hand women/femininity were constructed as the fundamental other to Christianity, on the other hand, the need for womanhood/femininity that could exist within male Christianity persisted. My argument is that this necessary second step of including women and femininity took and is still taking place by constructing an illusional and exceptional image of the ideal woman that is in fact the holy virgin and Christ's mother Mary. In the words of Sabine Demel: Mary as the »pure, self-sacrificing, humble maid and painful mother, [serves for catholic women] explicitly and implicitly […] as the model to be imitated but always unattainable« (Demel 2012: 53).

Within this framework, being a Christian woman took and takes place under precarious circumstances: As long as the ultimate idol of Mary is not achieved – and in fact never can be achieved – women are dependent on the benevolent acceptance of their constructed inferiority by the Christian norm, i. e., the man/manhood. In the following longue durée approach I will analyse these constructions of male Christianity by analysing the perspectives of three theologians – Jerome, John Meyer and Pius XI. – and their male gaze.

The term ›male gaze‹ is taken from the academic discipline of film studies: It describes the »active-male, controlling and curious view« (Jahn-Sudmann/Kaczmarek 2022) on women which forms the appearance of women according to the male phantasies. Under the determining male gaze by the camera, women become (sexual) objects with the main designation to be something to be looked at (see Jahn-Sudmann/Kaczmarek 2022).

In the following analysis, it will not be the camera but the theological male gazes of Jerome, John Meyer and Pius XI. which determine womanhood/femininity in their theological works. While the first author can give us an impression of Christian gendered-religionizing strategies in the early Church and – as a church father – became influential for all today's Christian traditions, the latter are specific examples of Western and especially Catholic Christian thinking. I chose these authors as my research expertise lies within Catholic theology, but I would like to suggest that varieties of the highlighted mechanisms can be found not only in Catholic Christianities but in all religions that have been developed in the interweaving with patriarchal systems. Further research may focus on examples from other religious backgrounds to check this thesis.

The general relation between religion and anthropocentrism is hereby nothing new. Already since the 1970s gender-sensitive scholars have been analysing the construction of religion from a male perspective and the precarious role of women within religious fields. Especially the understanding of the religious subject as in fact male has been impressively shown in several works. Recently, Birgit Heller and Edith Franke collected this research in an extensive compendium (see Heller/Franke 2024). My article understands itself to be within the tradition of this research with the

enlargement of focussing on the strategies of the gendered constructing mechanism following Moyaert's ideas.

2. Late Antiquity – Jerome's gaze

With our first protagonist, we are visiting a theologian whose influence on all forms of what we understand as Christian today cannot be underestimated. Starting with a theological thinker who laid the ground for the further institutionalizing of Christianity, I would like to offer a shared reference to different kinds of Christian research on the question of gendering mechanisms across all Christianities. Born in 347 AD Sophronius Eusebius Hieronymus (Engl. Jerome) became one of the most influential theologians of Late Antiquity and is considered one of the church fathers of Early Christianity. According to the monastic model, he became acquainted with on his travels in Gallia, he lived a strict ascetic life which implied physical renunciations especially of sexual kind (see Heil 2009). He received his outstanding importance for Christianity because of his comprehensive translation work of biblical texts as he was fluent in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. The *vulgata* – his Latin bible translation – formed the basis for further theological understanding in the known world at the time. Women played an important role in Jerome's theological work as we know from his translations and letters. His gaze on women shows an interesting, although, contradictory construction of womanhood/femininity.

Jerome mainly looks at women as a (erotic) danger to the purity of Christianity: Coming from an ascetic view of the world he strictly reduces women – more than men – to their physical condition. In his commentaries on the *Ecclesiastes* Jerome presents women (in the words of Feichtinger) as »the pinnacle of all evil and the epitome of sin and mortal depravity« (Feichtinger 2021: 6). He combines in an ahistorical form ancient misogynist prejudice – mostly from »pagan-Hellenistic, oriental-Jewish and ascetic-Christian« background (Feichtinger 2021: 7) – with the biblical text: Through their condition reduced to corporality, women represent the temptations of the time that pious men need to resist (see Feichtinger 2021: 6).

Additionally, the works of Jerome and other writers of the 4th Century present the first *systematic* Christian connection between heresy and womanhood (see Petersen 2013: 120). Based on the assumption that they are connected to everything inferior in the world, women were made responsible for either being more inclined to participate in movements considered heretic or as seducers of men towards heresies (see Petersen 2013: 122). In line with my argument, Petersen interprets this construction of women/femininity as a strategy of making Christianity male: »Both ›women‹ and ›heresy‹ are constructed as the other to the actual, whereby the actual, the original is marked by the terms ›man‹ and ›orthodoxy‹.« (Petersen 2013: 122)

As mentioned before this condemnation of women/femininity is not the only way women are represented in Jerome's work. Besides the understanding of women as *malae mulieres* – the *femmes fatales* of Antiquity – he also offers ›positive‹ characterizations of the female kind. In his independently added *praefatio* of the book of Judith, Jerome praises Judith in her role as widow

and model of chastity who gained her outstanding position in the biblical text from God as a reward for her pious, pure way of living (see Lange 2016: 116). The fact that Jerome added this passage as a preface to the biblical translation shows that he wanted to frame the story of Judith and the killing of Holofernes in a broader understanding of female determination. Just because of Judith's *castitas* God has given her the honour and *virtus* for her divine task, her actual deed is reduced to her ascetic sexual behaviour (see Lange 2016: 126).

Feichtinger supports Lange's analysis with further sources. Especially in Jerome's letters, we find the positive representation of women as virgins, widows or – as an exception – women in Joseph's marriage (see Feichtinger 2021: 7). According to Jerome's general understanding of virginity, Feichtinger interprets Jerome's presentations of these forms of lifestyles as a possibility for women to live without actually being female. Only by denying their biological female condition, do women have the possibility to live a pious, Christian life as men (see Feichtinger 2021: 8). Feichtinger interprets these thoughts as a result of Jerome's misogynist mindset that reflects his time and his interest to keep the (financial) support of Aristocratic women around him (see Feichtinger 2021: 8). Petersen adds a more fundamental explanation for Jerome's image of women: In the time of the 4th Century, when Christianity became the leading social group of the Mediterranean world, the power of men needed to be unmistakably secured against external attacks – women seemed to be understood as such an *external* threat (see Petersen 2013: 120).

According to my argument, this first male gaze demonstrates two points: Already at the dawn of Christianity women were – on a discursive level – systematically excluded from the male social body of Christianity. Women were considered both seductive and seducible and, therefore, a potential danger to the safety of a male-understood Christianity. Hereby, the interreligious references to Jewish traditions can be seen, for instance, in Jerome's interweaving of femininity and seduction presented in the Talmud where – according to Heller and Franke – women are primarily presented as possible problems for men (see Heller/Franke 2024: 23). At the same time women could not simply be excluded in total from the social group because Christianity and concrete Christians such as Jerome needed women for the reproductivity of the group and/or as personal and financial supporters. Therefore, an alternative form of ›female living‹ needed to be created that linked female existence to virginity, widowhood or sexually reduced forms of marriage that should – as far as possible – get rid of biological expressions of femininity. Jerome hereby chooses the combination of condemning the natural female conditions and concrete women who are not able to make themselves free from their physical burdens, while simultaneously praising rare examples of women overcoming their expectable behaviour.

3. Middle Ages – Meyer's gaze

The second chosen example is probably of lower prominence. John Meyer as a South German regional historical actor in the Medieval times serves as a typical – even though pre-Reformatory – Catholic author glorifying the monastic traditions of Christianity. In understanding religious orders as showpieces of a pious Christian life, the story of John Meyer, however, gives us a pre-

cious insight into late medieval theological thinking in general. In the 15th Century AD, monastic life within the Mendicant Orders such as the Dominicans and Franciscans was fundamentally reorganised. Especially the female convents were accused of drifting away from the original ideals of their founders at the beginning of the 13th Century. Rumours of possessions of luxurious goods, not holding the praying hours and receiving male visitors were widely spread, and even pregnancies needed to be dealt with (see Hirbodian 2016a: 31–33). An extensive reform programme by the orders' Chapters should enforce the strict enclosure within the convents which was a characteristic feature of the Medicant's female branches. How far these reforms should be taken was a far-reaching conflict that divided the orders into two factions: the Observants who stood up for a strict enclosure and the Conventuals who argued in favour of a more open approach to the women's everyday lives (see Hirbodian 2016a: 35).

John Meyer was born in 1422 or 1423 in Zurich and died in 1485 in Adelhausen near Freiburg. Since 1432 he was a member of the Dominican Medicant Order and became one of the protagonists of the so-called third wave of the Dominican reform programme that was highly focused on the female branch of the order. As confessor and reformer, he insisted on the reintroduction of a strict enclosure in his convents, as historian and chronic he became one of the most important witnesses of the successes and struggles of this process in the Southwest of the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation in late 15th Century (see Wehrli-Johns 2009).

In his texts we see an interesting example of how womanhood/femininity should be shaped in his view: Meyer presents the nuns of the convents that he intends to bring back to a strict observant form of existence as »wilde unzucht- und ungaistlich swöstern« (Meyer 1908/09: 81): They are wild, obscene and unchaste. The reintroduction of enclosure is, in Meyer's opinion, the only way to save their souls and bring back order to the convents. In his understanding of an active and passive enclosure, the nuns were neither allowed to be seen nor to see anyone. Consequently, convents were constructed in a special architectural form with the result that even for necessary exchanges with the external world, the sisters used winches and tightly barred windows to avoid direct contact (see Hirbodian 2016b: 457). Theologically, enclosure should guarantee that the nuns' souls stay pure. Understood to be a mirror, every gaze and every impression from the outside was a shadow that would contaminate their soul (see Lentes 1996: 179–180). The unchaste behaviour and language of the nuns were interpreted by Meyer as such shadows of the souls.

Following Michel Foucault, Heike Uffmann is analysing women's Late Medieval monasteries as models of physical disciplining and precursors of modern factories and prisons (see Foucault 1977: 175–177; Uffmann 1999: 193). In accordance with that, normative sources such as Meyer's reports emphasised the observant lifestyle in behaviour, nutrition and abstinence from the world – that is a fully controlled lifestyle – as the only possibility of female monastic existence. Hereby, the guiding figures of femininity/womanhood in Meyer's works are purity and obedience.

According to my argument, the analysis of Meyer's gaze on late medieval Dominican nuns shows the following: Femininity/Womanhood needed a special form of attention through the male gaze. As representatives of the order and the Church in general, deviant behaviour from the normative expectations towards femininity could not be accepted but needed to be actively regulated.

Hereby, the order's authorities neither tried to exclude the female branches from the monastic orders as punishment for their behaviour nor tried to find compromises with the ›wild sisters‹. Instead, they enforced the isolation of the women from the outside world with the goal of reestablishing purity and obedience.

The passion in carrying out the fight for the reforms of women's conventions can be interpreted from different perspectives: Political aims played an important role as well as social dynamics within urban communities. From a theological perspective, caring about women's salvation was just one side of the medal. On the other side, the nun's flawless lifestyle was also needed to serve as a general role model for Christian femininity and as an admonishing sign for deviant womanhood. While Moyaert in her work sees the binary of purity and impurity as the central division between Christianity and the Other (Moyaert 2024: 109), the normative sources of Meyer expect an extraordinary extent of purity from women as the Other to the male norm *within* Christianity that justify the female existence in the Church and demonstrates the unworthiness of those who are not achieving the ideal of pure womanhood.

4. Modernity – Pius' gaze

The last case sheds light on the struggles over a changing gender order in the 20th century. With a pope as the protagonist, we meet an explicit Catholic representative of the time with a decidedly European view on the so-called *women's question*. In the future, it will be important to examine examples from other geographical and religious backgrounds in order to compare their position on the emancipation of women with the official Catholic Church view presented here.

Born as Achille Ambrogio Damiano Ratti in 1857, Pius XI. ruled as pope of the Catholic Church from 1922 till 1939. Framed mostly by the politically tense time between the two World Wars, Pius XI. became famous for his engagement in Catholic social doctrine. His encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* positions itself in the direct line of Leo XIII.'s social politics of the 19th Century.

In 1930 Pius XI. published the encyclical *Casti Conubii* on the meaning and concrete framework of marriage and family in a Catholic sense. As the biggest danger for the Christian marriage Pius XI. sees the »new and utterly perverse morality« (Cast. Con., no. 3) that supposedly spreads all around the world. One expression of this perverted morality is the spreading idea of the emancipation of women, provoked by the neglected and lustful environment of the time (see Cast. Con., no. 74). In Pius' opinion, women's emancipation presents itself in three kinds: physiological, economic and social. All three forms endanger the Catholic marriage and family as they do not respect the woman's role towards her husband which should be expressed by »honourable and trusting obedience« (Cast. Con., no. 74).

Pius' arguing against any form of female emancipation inevitably results in women's areas of responsibility in family and marriage, such as being mothers and housewives. In following these tasks, the mother and wife would not only pay the due respect and attention towards her husband and children, even more importantly she would humbly accept her position on the »truly regal

throne to which she has been raised within the walls of the home by means of the Gospel« (Cast. Con., no. 75). This place of honour is hereby – and that is extraordinarily important for my argument – also a distinctive characteristic of Christian women towards their ›pagan‹ counterparts, where women are reduced to a »mere instrument of men« (Cast. Con., no. 75) by being involved in all spheres of everyday life.

In conclusion to this third spotlight: Modernity confronted the Catholic Church with unprecedented challenges. Temptations of different kinds proved the Church's members' real commitment to Catholicism. Especially women were endangered to fall for these developments as – according to Pius – they were way easier to be seduced by modern promises as formulated by the emancipatory women's movement of the time. The example of *Casti Conubii* shows how Pius tries to localise the Other to male Christianity within the Christian social doctrine. Women as mothers and housewives can prove their loyalty towards Catholicism only over their humble and thankful acceptance of their ›place of honour‹ within the family. Obedience, purity and chastity function as leading figures in filling out this position, acting against these leading figures is proving the women's belonging to the ›pagan environment' and the exclusion from pure Christianity.

5. Epilogue – Maria Goretti's Martyrdom

Pius XII., Pius XI.' direct successor, beatified the young Maria Goretti on the 27th of April 1947, she was canonised in 1950. The girl died at the age of eleven in 1902 after a worker on her parent's court tried to rape her and stabbed her down. Before she died in hospital, she forgave her torturer and promised she would pray for him in heaven. Pius XII. founded her beatification and canonisation on her will to rather die than lose her virginity: »virginitatis gloriam non amisit« (Pius XII. 1950).

For Pius XII. Maria Goretti represented not only an example for young men and women to protect their purity at any cost but also served as a model for womanhood/femininity in total: Women are expected to prove their commitment to Christianity on a level that surpasses their power or leads to their demise. In a nutshell, the praised purity of Maria Goretti shows Christian women not only in the 1940s but today how an accepted femininity/womanhood in male-thought Christianity is in fact an illusion.

My article on gendered religionization presented three flashlights of the history of Christianity. The male gazes of Jerome, John Meyer and Pius XI. illustrated that womanhood/femininity was anticipated as the Other to a male-understood Christianity. Jerome, on the basis of ancient misogynist thinking, connects heresy directly with femininity, John Meyer explores female monastic communities as gateways to impure thinking and behaviour towards the pure Christian monastic ideals, and Pius XI. sees women as extraordinarily susceptible to modern forms of depreciation such as emancipation.

As a total exclusion of women didn't appear convincing to the three theologians, they developed ways of an acceptable existence of women as the Other within the male Christian sphere, espe-

cially using two strategies: oppressing control and enrapturing glorification. By designing clear roles and spaces for women, theologians such as Jerome, Meyer and Pius tried to control the risk of the seducible femininity within Christianity. By creating unreachable female idols, they similarly let women know that a real belonging to the Christian community is a privilege that only a few women actually deserve.

From a historiographical point of view, the approach chosen in this article gives rise to some criticism: Putting forward a strong thesis and imposing it on selected historical examples does not correspond to the methodology of historical scholarship, which initially allows the sources to speak for themselves (see also Moyaert 2024: 7). For instance, the fighting for a strict enclosure of Medieval monastic women could be – and has been – interpreted also as a historical moment of giving women their own agency within a protected space independent from a sexist Medieval social order. Further research therefore needs to analyse a broader source basis within a smaller field of investigation to claim more comprehensive results.

But still, I am convinced – and I hope to have emphasised it in this article – that Marianne Moyaert's *History of Religionization* offers an instrument of analysis for understanding the dynamics of community building in Christianity. It uncomfortably demonstrates how Christianity (as we know it today) could only be constructed by a constant process of othering, with the aim of self-assuring the inside of what Christianity actually is. In my article, I tried to enlarge Moyaert's approach by not only looking at processes that externalised the Other but also to see how the Other – in the form of womanhood/femininity – has been dealt with within Christianity. In my analysis, I focused on the male gaze of Christianity ignoring the alternative perspective of female voices with the goal of analysing the dominant narratives of the History of Christianity and crystallising the importance of (further) female struggles of gaining one's own gaze on the essence of Christianity and making them seen.

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