



Review of Sven Glawion, Elahe Haschemi Yekani, and Jana Husmann-Kastein (eds.), *Erlöser: Figurationen männlicher Hegemonie* [Redeemer: Figurations of Male Hegemony] (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007) 218 pp. and

Susanne Lanwerd, and Márcia Elisa Moser (eds.), *Frau–Gender–Queer: Gendertheoretische Ansätze in der Religionswissenschaft* [Women–Gender–Queer: Gender Theory in Religious Studies] (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2010) 291 pp.

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To insert gender as an analytical category into the academic study of theology and religion has been met with resistance at German universities. For years feminist theologians have struggled to get a foot into theology departments, and the more recent gender and sexuality studies have not fared much better. Gender-conscious theologies are produced at the margins of the theological establishment and often are published in edited volumes, like the recent *Theologie und Geschlecht* by Walz and Plüss (2008). They are read by an interested public but generally ignored by the professoriate.

The separate discipline of *Religionswissenschaften* (religious sciences) at German universities, which has deliberately severed its ties from any theological and faith-based perspective, has also been reluctant to incorporate gender as a critical category. However, due to the fact that the fields of *Religionswissenschaften* and cultural studies conjoin in some places, gender and sexuality issues are beginning to find their way into the research. The two recently published volumes, *Erlöser* and *Frau–Gender–Queer*, speak to this trend. They illustrate the variety of scholarly approaches regarding the intersection of religion, culture and gender, in which religious phenomena are subjected to gender-conscious readings and where the genderedness of knowledge production itself gets queried in the *Religionswissenschaften*.

The two volumes consist of fourteen contributions each by mostly younger scholars who, at the time of publication, were in post-graduate, doctoral and master programs (*Frau–Gender–Queer*, however, also includes contributions of professors occupying chairs in *Religions-* and *Kulturwissenschaften*). Given the situation briefly sketched above, it does not come as a surprise that it is mainly a younger generation that is pushing for inclusion of gender and sexuality issues. In light of a competitive academic environment, in which critical gender approaches still need to find a solid footing, such efforts are commendable. There are, however, drawbacks. Too many of the contributors of the two volumes under review are caught up in summarizing the

secondary literature and in rehearsing already known theoretical debates rather than presenting fleshed-out case studies and innovative arguments that can stand on their own. Because a scent of incompleteness hovers over several chapters, readers might be left dissatisfied. *Erlöser* and *Frau–Gender–Queer* are, so to speak, setting the table for an intriguing menu but do not yet serve a meal.

Erlöser opens with the hypothesis that religious male redeemer figures appear in changed and transformed ways in secular contexts. This thesis is located within a larger context as described in the preface by Stefanie von Schnurbein. She states that “religion” is currently rediscovered by different disciplines as an influential and potent force in societal and discursive contexts. Hence, *Erlöser* understands itself as a contribution to gender analysis as it pertains to religious materials in its various (secular) guises. It follows in the footsteps of Christina von Braun—professor of cultural and gender studies in Berlin, who has built up a small following in Germany—who argues that “secularization” should be “understood as the transformation of the religious in modernity rather than its disappearance or marginalization” (p. 12). This framing permits inclusion of such divergent disciplines as cultural and gender studies, literature, American studies, communication theory, pedagogy, philosophy and art history.

Religious male redeemers, so claims the thesis, have been appropriated by different segments of modern culture because of their strong potential for generating and shaping discourses that inscribe “hegemonial masculinity” into the “symbolic order” (p. 14). “In the occidental tradition of redeemer figures, [men] innovate themselves as European knights and soldiers, white colonial rulers and missionaries, leaders of movements, doctors and scientists, *Überfathers* and father-killing sons as well as postmodern Hollywood heroes, all in the name of founding cultures and civilizations” (p. 15). Instances of such discursive reconfigurations are then traced in literary, filmic, political and artistic productions as well as analyzed within national, racialized and pedagogical contexts. The range of the appearances of the figure of male redeemers reaches from Kierkegaard and Strindberg to Bruce Springsteen and Mel Gibson, from Rudolf Steiner to C. G. Jung, from Robert Musil to Norman Mailer and James Baldwin, from the English gentleman-hero to romanticized versions of Polish nationalism in the writing of a transgendered Polish author. It includes the analysis of gendered nation-building in the work of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission as well as interviews with male clients of prostitutes within a framework of sexual identity formation.

The diverse chapters reveal an uneven application and comprehension of religious phenomena. Religion frequently vanishes behind the conceptual language of particular disciplines or the specific case studies under discussion. Chapters that foreground more strongly a religious dimension are Simon Strick’s analysis of Mel Gibson’s film, *The Passion of the Christ* (with particular emphasis on the interplay of the gaze and the spectacular of the body) and Swen Glawion’s critique of male spirituality in the writing of three German-speaking authors who have postulated an archetypal and mythopoetic understanding of gendered spirituality (C. G. Jung, Franz Alt, Anselm Grün). Glawion argues that behind the facade of an emancipatory agenda, revisionist Christian and German national ideals of masculinity are reinvigorated. Other chapters worth pointing to are: Daniela Hrzan’s creative investigation of “white masculinity” by comparing Bruce Springsteen’s album “The

Rising” with photographer Renée Cox’s “Yo Mama’s Last Supper,” which features a black, female, naked Jesus; Jana Husman-Kasten’s critique of the anthroposophic race and gender philosophy of Rudolf Steiner; and Ulrike Auga’s exploration of the confluence of South African nation-building and masculinity.

Generally, it appears that the editors of *Erlöser* must have provided strict guidelines about length, with the result that several chapters fail to provide sufficient context and background for those readers who are less familiar with a particular theme examined in this wide-ranging, interdisciplinary volume. *Erlöser* may have benefited from choosing fewer but more fully developed contributions.

Lanwerd’s and Moser’s *Frau–Gender–Queer* suffers from a similar problem. Here, too, one gets the impression that contributors were asked not to exceed a specific word count so as to make room for all the chapters. The quality, however, fluctuates heavily. Some chapters are of high scholarly prose while others, arguably, should not have been published at all (they recall decent work by graduate and undergraduate students that should be best kept in the files of their mentors rather than presented to the public). One is also irritated by the design flaws in the layout of the text, the number of typographical errors, and inconsistent bibliographic styles. A more rigorous editorial selection would have given *Frau–Gender–Queer* more consistency and avoided redundancy.

The three key terms are gender, sexuality and religion, and Lanwerd and Moser understand them as transdisciplinary categories that intersect, overlap and inform each other. Since most contributors come from an academic background in religious/cultural studies, theology and gender studies there is a shared common ground with regard to questions of religion. There is, however, a built-in redundancy due to the volume’s agenda to examine the theoretical underpinnings of gender in the *Religionswissenschaften*. Repeatedly, one learns about gender theoretical categories derived from the schools of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, with frequent references to the work of Christina von Braun. The recitations of theoretical positions are not varied enough to keep one’s attention.

Frau–Gender–Queer sets itself the task to question assumptions of standards of objectivity and value-neutrality in the conventional *Religionswissenschaften*, which has set itself apart from theology by replacing a faith-based hermeneutic with the scientific-secular study of religion. “The intention of the burgeoning *Religionswissenschaften* has been to come out of the shadows of theology and classical oriental philology,” writes Ulrike Auga. “This was accomplished only in the last decades by combining the historical and comparative dimensions in the history of religion with social sciences and philosophy. Ideally, the result would be a comparative *Religionswissenschaft* that is informed by the most current theoretical debates” (p. 230). What is needed, Birgit Heller writes elsewhere in the volume, is a “gender-conscious religious research [*Religionsforschung*],” where the subject position of the author is no longer “hidden behind claims of objectivity.” Is “religious indifference,” she asks, really the most beneficial position to occupy in the field of *Religionswissenschaften* (pp. 143-44)?

Unfortunately, the perspectives and positioning of the authors vis-à-vis religion remain largely unexplored in *Frau–Gender–Queer*. For example, Christina von Braun’s opening chapter on “Heteronormativity in the Three Religions of the Book” pulls together materials from well-known sources (for Judaism: David Biale,

Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Susannah Heschel; for Islam: Leila Ahmed, W. M. Watt; for Christianity: Caroline Walker Bynum, Leo Steinberg, Peter Brown), but her own position remains undisclosed. She wants to reveal the structural differences in the symbolic order of gender in these religious traditions and admits that her prototypical (*idealtypisch*) construction may lead to simplifications. Indeed, the result is a mostly simplified sketch. Von Braun's conclusion that "all three religions of the Book possess a stern heteronormativity, but that the latter is very differently justified," (p. 34) does not surpass common sense.

Susanne Schröter's promising title on feminist reinterpretations of the Qur'an and Sunna is largely based on summaries, too—in her case on the work of scholars Riffat Hassan, Leila Ahmed and Fatima Mernissi. Schröter writes a succinct overview of the current debate and incorporates important Islamic concepts, such as the distinction between the two hermeneutical modes of *ijtihad* and *taqlid*. Her piece is a helpful introduction but does not constitute new research. She positions herself in support of Islamic feminists, but her own religious commitment (or non-commitment) is not subject to self-reflection. With Birgit Heller we may ask: Why is Schröter "religiously indifferent" while simultaneously claiming the "feminist position" of the *other*, in her case, of Muslim women?

More innovative is the approach taken by Lydia Potts and Jan Kühnemund. They examine different masculine behaviors among Muslim migrants in Europe and how these young men negotiate culturally distinct, normative codes. Noteworthy is Stefanie Schnurbein's exploration of the figure of the shaman as a queer icon. She cautions against any easy appropriation of shamanism since the latter is often grounded in the gender essentialism and right-wing ideology of neopaganism. Michael Brinkschröder examines how same-sex love gets reinscribed into symbolic systems of religions in an underdetermined, yet erotically connoted way. He illustrates his argument by looking at the operations of the *logos* in Philo, Paul and select early Christologies. Susanne Lanwerd offers a brief essay on the photographic representation of veiled Muslim women in German newspapers, explaining how and why the juxtaposition of a veiled woman and white male soldiers resumes an Orientalist gaze that solidifies Western ideals of secularism. Again, her own perspective as a secular woman scholar is only presumed but not explicated.

I mentioned earlier that some contributions would have best been excised from *Frau–Gender–Queer*. One example is Eva Tolksdorf's "Homosexual Orientation and Christian Religiosity." Couched in heavy but undigested lingo, we find a narrative interpretation of an interview with a former Protestant minister who had his coming-out only after his retirement. In Tolksdorf's jargon, it reads thus: "Im Rahmen meines Forschungsprojektes wurde die qualitativ-empirische Datenerhebungsmethode eines leitfadengestützten biographisch-narrativen Interviews angewendet [within the confines of my research project, I used a qualitative-empirical method of data inquiry of a biographical-narrative interview based on a main connecting thread]" (p. 82). Her data basis, however, consist of only one (!) interview of 118 minutes. I would not accept this even as a senior paper from an undergraduate student! In cases like this, Lanwerd and Moser should have taken a more prudent and rigorous editorial stance or followed a peer-reviewed model of assessment.

Some repetition could have been avoided by opening *Frau–Gender–Queer* with a solid piece on the theoretical framework rather than having too many

contributors repeating these debates in their own words. Such a chapter—in a slightly expanded version—could have been Márcia Moser’s “The Gender of Religion,” in which she sketches the conceptual perimeters of the volume’s main focus on gender theory and religious studies. Although Moser focuses on the category of “woman,” she also briefly reviews the role of sexualities and queer studies that deconstruct the male–female binary. She delineates with clarity some of the important terminology, such as intersectionality and interdependence. Rather than being tucked away two thirds into the reading, her chapter might have been better placed at the front of *Frau–Gender–Queer*.

In conclusion: The two volumes show us the paths that need to be taken, and it is hoped that they inspire further work of more consistent quality to emerge in the future.

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