

A DRAG QUEEN GENDER NEUTRAL JESUS?

New Ways in Theology at Holy Cross - March 2018

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By Elinor Reilly '18

A little over ten years ago, on the occasion of their 50th Reunion, alumni of the College endowed the Class of 1956 Chair of New Testament Studies, a distinguished professorship associated with the Religious Studies department.¹ In the autumn of 2013, the College appointed professor Tat-Siong Benny Liew to fill this position. Professor Tat-siong Benny Liew received bachelor's and master's degrees from Olivet Nazarene University and completed his doctorate at Vanderbilt University.² Prior to his appointment at Holy Cross, Professor Liew had been Professor of New Testament at the Pacific School of Theology, and before that taught at Chicago Theological Seminary. According to the Department of Religious Studies webpage, his fields of specialty include "synoptic gospels, gospel of John, cultural and racial interpretations and receptions of the Bible, apocalypticism, and Asian American history and literature."³

Professor Liew's numerous publications reveal an unconventional approach to gender, sexuality, and race in the biblical texts. The 2004 article "Mistaken Identities but Model Faith: Rereading the Centurion, the Chap, and the Christ in Matthew 8:5-13," provides a representative example. Professor Liew and his co-author, Theodore Jennings, argue that Matthew 8:5-13, the story of the centurion who goes to Jesus to ask for healing for his servant, ought to be interpreted in terms of a sexual relationship. Matthew's account, runs the argument, does not concern a centurion and his servant, but a centurion and his lover/slave. "The centurion's rhetoric about not being 'worthy' of a house visit by Jesus (8:8) may be the centurion's way of avoiding an anticipated 'usurpation' of his current boylove on the part of his new patron [Jesus]," they assert. Furthermore, "The way Matthew's Jesus seems to affirm the centurion's pederastic relationship with his παῖς, we contend, may also be consistent with Matthew's affirmation of many sexual dissidents in her Gospel."⁴

In 2009, Professor Liew edited the volume *They Were All Together in One Place?: Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*. A copy of the volume is displayed in a case in the Religious Studies Department. Professor Liew's contributions give shape to this volume: along with serving as the primary editor, he wrote the introduction to the volume and contributed an essay. As such, the volume as a whole sheds particular light on Professor Liew's interpretations of the biblical texts.

Professor Liew's contribution to this volume, a chapter entitled "Queering Closets and Perverting Desires: Cross-Examining John's Engendering and Transgendering Word across Different Worlds," demonstrates the centrality of sex and gender to his way of thinking about the New Testament. In the chapter, Professor Liew explains that he believes Christ could be considered a "drag king" or cross-dresser. "If one follows the trajectory of the Wisdom/Word or Sophia/Jesus (con)figuration, what we have in John's Jesus is not only a "king of Israel" (1:49; 12:13– 15) or "king of the Ioudaioi" (18:33, 39; 19:3, 14– 15, 19– 22), but also a drag king (6:15; 18:37; 19:12)," he claims.⁵ He later argues that "[Christ] ends up appearing as a drag-kingly bride in his passion."⁶

Professor Liew continues:

In addition, we find Jesus disrobing and robbing in the episode that marks Jesus' focus on the disciples with the coming of his 'hour' (13:3– 5, 12). This disrobing, as [Colleen] Conway points out, does not disclose anything about Jesus' anatomy. Instead, it describes Jesus washing his disciples' feet. As more than one commentator has pointed out, foot-washing was generally only done by Jewish women or non-Jewish slaves. ¹² John is clear that Jesus is an Ioudaios (4:9, 22; 18:33– 35; 19:40); what John is less clear about is whether Jesus is a biological male. Like a literary striptease, this episode is suggestive, even seductive; it shows and withholds at the same time.⁷

Professor Liew asserts that Jesus's "excessive" and "deceptive" speech would be considered "feminine" in the culture of the time.⁸ In defense of this claim, he states that in Greco-Roman culture:

Women pollute since their moist and soft nature is also more susceptible to the assaults of wanton desires, erotic or otherwise. In short, women are wet and (thus) wild. I am suggesting that John's constant references to Jesus wanting water (4:7; 19:28), giving water (6:35), and leaking water (19:34) speak to Jesus' gender indeterminacy and hence his cross-dressing and other queer desires...⁹

He clarifies that he is not suggesting that Christ is actually a woman, but that he is neither male nor female. "I want to suggest that John's crossdressing Jesus shows that a so-called 'core' is but a(n significant) effect of bodily acts," he

Professor Liew's understanding of Jesus in "Queering Desires" suggests an unusual interpretation of the Holy Trinity:

Suffice it to say that not only does this exchange of desires place the Father's identity in question but also that the Father-Son dyad in John is always already interrupted by and dependent on the participation of a third party. One may, as a result, turn around Jesus' well-known statement in John, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6c): Jesus himself needs others to cum with the Father. Jesus' statement that "I in them [his followers] and you [the Father] in me" turns out to be quite a description. What we find in John is a Jesus who longs to be "had" by the Father... Things do not get less queer as one gets to the other parts of John's Gospel. It is noticeable that throughout the Gospel Jesus and his Father form a "mutual glorification society" (5:41; 8:50, 54; 12:28–29; 13:32; 17:1, 4–5). This constant elevation or stroking is nothing less than an exciting of the penis, or better yet, phallus. Its consistency is then explainable, since "we all know that after ... an orgasmic dissemination or circulation, the phallus, like most penises, becomes limp" (Sifuentes-Jáuregui 2002, 159). Fast forwarding to the passion narratives, Conway observes that John's Jesus is a "quintessential man" because he "reveals no weakening to the passions that might undercut his manly deportment" (2003a, 175). If this is so, there is also something quintessentially queer here. During the passion, Jesus is not only beaten (18:22–23; 19:3) and flogged (19:1); his body is also nailed and his side pierced (19:18, 23a, 34, 37; 20:24–28). Oddly, John defines Jesus' masculinity with a body that is being opened to penetration. 24 Even more oddly, Jesus' ability to face his "hour" is repeatedly associated with his acknowledging of and communing with his Father (12:27–28; 14:12, 28; 16:10, 17, 28; 17:1–25; 18:11), who is, as Jesus explicitly states, "with me" (16:32) throughout this process, which Jesus also describes as one of giving birth (16:21–22). What I am suggesting is that, when Jesus' body is being penetrated, his thoughts are on his Father. He is, in other words, imagining his passion experience as a (masochistic?) sexual relation with his own Father.¹¹

Professor Liew's editorship of the volume reflects the same method of interpretation. In the introduction to *They Were All Together in One Place?*, he and his fellow editors explain the idea of "minority criticism," admitting that the "dominant criticism" will at times "outright dismiss" minority criticism. One of the stated goals here is "relativizing" the "dominant criticism" which exists. Other chapters in the volume include such titles as "'That's Why They Didn't Call the Book Hadassah!': The Interse(ct)/(x)ionality of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in the Book of Esther" and "Incarnate Words: Images of God and Reading Practices."

Readers will note that *They Were All Together in One Place?* and "Mistaken Identities but Model Faith" were published in 2009 and 2004, respectively. Professor Liew's more recent works reflect similar lines of thought. For instance, the 2016 essay, "The Gospel of Bare Life," describes obedience to God as "troubling" and "infantilizing." Professor Liew writes, "John's Jesus, as well as those who follow John's Jesus, are supposed to be fully subjected to the will of the Father to the point of death (6:35–64; 10:1–18; 15:1–16:4; 21:15–19), then are we not back to a scenario in which a Caesar-like head sits comfortably in a choice seat and watches bare life performing death for his purposes and his enjoyment?"¹²

Professor Liew is often responsible for teaching "New Testament," the College's primary New Testament class. Its course description lists three texts: *The HarperCollins Study Bible*; *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, by Bart Ehrman; and *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*, by Harvard Divinity School professor Karen King. In addition to this class, Professor Liew has also taught "Sex, Money, Power, and Sacred Texts" and "Apocalyptic Then and Now," according to the College's student registration website.

Professor Liew's unconventional readings of Scripture has brought a new theological perspective to Holy Cross. The position and prestige which accompany an endowed chair in Religious Studies testify to the esteem in which his work is held by the College's administration and academic community. He continues to be held up as an example and a bold successor to the learned and discerning tradition of our Catholic and Jesuit College of the Holy Cross.