

The Christianity Seminar

A Report on the 2018 Fall Meeting

Hal Taussig

The fall 2018 meeting of the Christianity Seminar marked the final of its three meetings focused on gender in the first two centuries. It gave special attention to the second century and intentionally worked on overarching issues of gender in a range of emerging Christ communities and movements.

Celene Lillie's paper, "Thinking through Gender in the Second-Century Jesus Movements," contributed significantly to the larger picture of gendered dimensions by demonstrating their multiplicity and diversity. To this end she described the different kinds of genders in four second-century documents: 1 Timothy, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, the Gospel of Mary, and On the Origin of the World. Lillie argues that in each of these texts,

Women play a prominent role, however, the position of females within these texts often situates them in stark contrast to their male "counterparts," highlighting an array of gendered dynamics. These texts also address a wide range of issues from sexuality to celibacy, marital status to violence, suggesting a wide variety of investments and concerns within the proliferation of Jesus groups during this time period.

Lillie's treatment of 1 Timothy showed a very conservative gendered reality. For instance, the author of 1 Timothy wrote:

I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves in modest clothes with respect and discretion—not with plaited hair and gold or pearls, or costly clothes, but, as fitting for women who are God-fearing, with good works. Let a woman learn in silence in full subordination. I command no woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, if they stand fast in faith and love and holiness with discretion.* (1 Tim 2:8–15)

Lillie comments:

These words are both prescriptive and prohibitive: women are told what to wear—"dress in modest clothes with respect and discretion"—as well as what not to wear—"plaited hair," "gold," "pearls," or "costly clothes"

(1 Tim 2:9). Women are allowed to "learn in silence in full submission," but are not allowed "to teach or have authority over a man" (1 Tim 2:11–12a). Then, as if once were not enough, the text re-emphasizes the command for women to be silent. (1 Tim 2:12b)

Lillie shows how 1 Timothy's reading of the Eden story (Gen 2:4–3:24) drives a strong patriarchal bargain and elaborates a case for the subordination of woman, citing its treatment of widows (1 Tim 5:5–6; 5:12, 5:14–15). Similarly,

Though women—both married and widowed—are instructed to manage their homes well, 1 Timothy is clear that they are subordinate in this, too. In prescribing and prohibiting attributes of would-be bishops, the text states men must be, "irreproachable, married only once, sober, reasonable, modest, hospitable, a good teacher, not a drunk, not violent but kindly, noncombative, not money-loving" (3:2–3). But the pinnacle of this list comes when the letter states that the prospective bishop "must head his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way—for if one does not know how to head his own household, how can he manage God's assembly?" (3:4–5).

1 Timothy prescribes and prohibits similar qualities for deacons, who must be "honorable, not insincere, not indulging in too much wine, not greedy," have faith, a clear conscience, and be blameless (3:8–10). They, of course, too, must "be married only once" and be able to "head their children and their households well" (3:12). And Lillie lays out clear reasons to see men in 1 Timothy as privileged and in control of women.

Lillie finds things quite different, however, in the Acts of Paul and Thecla. This early second-century text tells the story of teenage woman who leaves home and betrothal in order to become a healer and teacher like Paul. For this Thecla is brought to "justice" by Roman authorities, who try to burn her to death and, when that fails, to kill her with wild beasts in the arena. Although she asks Paul to baptize her so that her work as healer and teacher may be supported, Paul rebuffs her.

Lillie describes how

Women and children continue to defend Thecla as she is processed in the street, and bound to a ferocious lioness who, rather than mauling her, sits and licks her feet. Both Tryphaena and Thecla appeal to God as Thecla is led into the stadium. Stripped but for a girdle as lions and bears are thrown into the ring, Thecla is rushed by a lioness who once again lays at her feet. A bear then attacks, but the lioness intercepts, killing it. Finally, a man-eating lion is let loose, but again, the lioness engages it. She kills the lion, but loses her own life in the process.

More and more animals enter the arena as Thecla raises her hands in prayer. She then plunges into a pool

* All translations are Taussig's unless otherwise noted.

filled with killer seals, declaring for herself that which was denied by Paul: "In the name of Jesus Christ I baptize myself!" With a lightning flash, the seals die, and Thecla is surrounded by "a cloud of fire so that neither the wild animals could touch her, nor could she be seen naked," (34:36). As the onslaught of animals continue, Thecla is aided by women pacifying the beasts with perfume. In a final effort to see her dead, she is bound to bulls, but her bonds are consumed by flame, and she is set free.

Thecla is finally free to do her work, which she does for her entire life, occasionally with Paul and sometimes on her own. In some regards, Paul is portrayed as Thecla's colleague and, in others, he seems to be a thoughtless authority figure. So, as Lillie concludes, "In these examples, while Thecla moves beyond her circumscribed status, the men must work harder and harder not only to try to restore her to her proper place, but also to retain their own social status."

Thecla's powerful leadership is reminiscent of the second-century portrait of Mary of Magdala in the Gospel of Mary. But Lillie notes that this gospel

mentions nothing about sexuality. While Mary is defined and named as "woman" throughout her eponymous gospel, nothing in particular is said about her sexuality or marital status: she is neither celibate nor wife, mother nor virgin; in this text she is simply teacher, seer, comforter, and exemplary leader.

The Gospel of Mary paints a striking picture of a woman's leadership in that the character of Mary is portrayed as Jesus' closest companion and best advocate for his teaching. After Jesus's death, he enjoins his disciples, including Mary, to continue his work. But, except for Mary, the disciples fear those who have killed Jesus. When, with Mary's encouragement, the disciples seem ready to proceed, Peter and Andrew rebuff Mary because she is a woman and her teachings appear strange to them. Levi then defends Mary and leads proclamation of the good news of Jesus's teachings.

Lillie summarizes:

Throughout the extant portion of this text, Mary exemplifies the stability, clarity, and knowledge of an exemplary leader. In the midst of the Savior's departure and the fear of similar violence, Mary not only is an example of stability and clarity, but she uses her own skill to steady the group. Additionally, she is singled out for special status with the Savior and the special teachings from him. While Peter qualifies Mary's special relationship saying that the Savior loved her more than other *women*, Levi is clear to correct that the Savior loved her more than everyone, his male followers included. ... It is important to remember, though, that Levi's defense is not only predicated on Mary and her character but also upon the Savior's teachings themselves. Levi's words imply that Jesus did not pro-

hibit women's teaching, visions, etc. Rather, laying down new laws against women teaching and their place as leaders within the community is characteristic of the adversaries, not followers of the Savior. *All* can seek and acquire their true humanity, because, according to the text, it is something that lies within. Therefore, in terms of the Gospel of Mary, distinctions in status (though Peter tries again and again) cannot be made on the basis of gender.

Lillie's treatment of the Nag Hammadi document, *On the Origin of the World*, and particularly its story of the cosmic rulers' rape of Eve embedded within the text is, like 1 Timothy, based on "a mythological elaboration of the creation narrative from Genesis." But its point about gender in the early Christ movements could not be more different. Rather than 1 Timothy's support of patriarchal power, *On the Origin* finds that "the fecundity of creation flows from divine female figures," according to Lillie.

As Eve enters the narrative, the rulers and authorities of the material world ... decide to create a human being because they fear the divine realm will try to ruin their work. ... In this way, the rulers hope to make those born from the light their slaves (112.25–113.5). However ... Wisdom/Sophia laughs at their plot, knowing through her foresight that their humans will be used in service of the divine to condemn the rulers (113.6–16). In order to advance her plan, Wisdom creates her own human first—a human who will instruct the rulers' Adam how to escape their grasp. Wisdom names her creation Eve (113.17–35). When the rulers finish their creation, Adam, he is lifeless on the ground having no spirit/breath, so they abandon him. Wisdom-Life eventually sends her own breath to Adam, giving him a soul; and ... then sends her daughter Life, also called Eve, to instruct Adam and cause him to rise. ... Eve's words are efficacious as Adam stands, the text stating that Eve's "word became a work," (*OnOrig.* 115.3–116.8).

The authorities are disturbed and decide to rape Eve. But Eve tricks the rulers of the world. She leaves her likeness with Adam and enters and becomes the Tree of Knowledge. So the rulers rape only Eve's likeness. Eve's likeness then takes the fruit, the knowledge, of the tree the real Eve has become, reintegrates herself, and shares this font of knowledge with Adam. Lillie summarizes this reversal by Eve after the rape.

As they ingest the fruit their minds open, they become enlightened, and they love one another. Through this eating they also see the rulers for what they are, beasts, and the two humans "loathe them," thus enacting the plan of the divine realm to save humanity from the rulers (119.6–18). In *On the Origin*, there is no man or male savior on top, but rather a constellation of female figures, imbued with divine power and efficacious in their own right. These female figures portray a sharp contrast to

Christianity Seminar Fall 2018 Ballot Items

David Wheeler-Reed

(Re)Reading Regulating Sex

The term porneia should no longer be translated as “fornication.”

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Porneia should be understood as any “illicit sexual activity,” and those “illicit activities” will change from ancient society to ancient society and from one ancient writer to the next.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Pink**

It does not make sense to limit porneia as Kyle Harper does to: (1) Prostitution; (2) Same-Sex intercourse; (3) Adultery; (4) Pre-marital intercourse

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Celene Lillie

Thinking through Gender in Second-Century Jesus Movements

Early Jesus followers imagined a myriad of possibilities and practices for women in the first several centuries of the Jesus movement.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Though many of the early texts of the Jesus movement reflect rhetoric rather than reality, opposition by early leaders such as Tertullian to women’s teaching, preaching, and baptizing point to women filling these roles.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

One of the ways in which the multiplicity of the Jesus movement is evidenced is through the multiple roles imagined for women in the first and second centuries.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Though occupying different leadership roles, a primary role of men in the first several centuries of

Jesus movement literature seems to be to uphold and circumscribe traditional gender norms.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Red**

Virginia Burrus

The Gender of Martyrdom

Early Christian martyrdom texts appropriate and confirm conventional ideals of masculinity by representing martyrs as victorious athletes, gladiators, or soldiers, tested and proven in the combat of the arena and demonstrating the highest degrees of self-control.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Red**

Early Christian martyrdom texts queer gender. That is to say, they resist and subvert understandings of gender that were widely held in the ancient Mediterranean. They do so by representing women, children, elders, the disabled, and slaves as more “masculine” than the rulers who torture, sentence, and execute them, by virtue of their capacity for passive endurance.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Early Christian martyrdom texts masculinize female martyrs to underline their superiority to their persecutors but at the same time reassign them to subordinate roles within the Christian community by emphasizing stereotypical feminine traits and roles, such as motherhood.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Red**

The representation of martyrs as birthing mothers, both literal and metaphorical, privileges maternal bodies and thereby exalts women. Female martyrs are presented as powerful exemplars qua women and also as potent theological symbols. Pain proves generative, in the labor of martyrdom as in birthing.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

the rulers: while the female figures of the divine realm display care and life-giving power, the rulers of the world in their arrogance and ignorance wield power to violate and subjugate.

In On the Origin, Lillie sees

a text that analyzes the structures of the world and imagines a possibility beyond them. ... Woman is not derivative or secondary to man, but is figured as efficacious, divine, trickster and also violated and split. ... Adam holds a space where the feminine does not need to be rejected, controlled, or kept under wraps; a space where

men and women can exist in partnership. ... Eve possesses the resources necessary to protect herself as well as direct her own healing. She is not shamed or blamed for the violence perpetrated against her, but through this violence the brutal structures of the world are unmasked.

Lillie’s portrait of Christ movements’ understanding of gender is not unified, for in addition to the patriarchal 1 Timothy, there are three other options in full view in the second century. On the Origin of the World, the Gospel of Mary, and the Acts of Paul and Thecla provide major alternatives. These other three are not a single alternative to 1

The gender of a martyr is inherently ambivalent, hybrid, unstable.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Joanna Dewey

Women: Their Visibility and Agency and Loss of Agency In Early Christian Texts

The Pauline traditions provide us with abundant evidence of both women's visibility and agency and of attempts to silence and control women.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Already in the second century, and continuing in the third and fourth, forces were gathering and reinforcing each other to limit women's agency.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

There is no title that Paul applies to a male leader that he does not also apply to a woman leader.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Paul approves of the theory of gender equality but is not fully comfortable with its practice.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Red**

Luke and Acts present an ambiguous picture of women. Public missionary activity is reserved for men. In Acts, women are visible but have restricted agency.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

The story of Thecla does not stand alone in the Apocryphal Acts: there are twelve named women in various Apocryphal Acts who hear an apostle preaching, reject sex and marriage, and get persecuted. And yet, they always get their way and thrive. These women were ancient Christian heroines.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

The Pastoral Epistles represent perhaps the most total capitulation of all the writings that were eventually included in the New Testament to the patriarchal, hierarchical, and male-dominated culture of the ancient world.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

The typical process of institutionalization enabled and solidified patriarchal Christianity.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

The move from house churches into public space enabled and solidified patriarchal Christianity.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Red**

The gradual shift from oral to written authority enabled and solidified patriarchal Christianity.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Red**

The reintroduction and increasing importance of sacrificial understandings of Jesus' death and of the Eucharist enabled and solidified patriarchal Christianity.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Red**

Constantine's conversion enabled and solidified patriarchal Christianity.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Red**

Red = strongly agree
Pink = generally agree
Gray = generally disagree
Black = strongly disagree

The strongest take-away concerning the study of gender in the first two centuries has to do with a final triumph of patriarchy in early Christianity.

Timothy, but rather three differing options that point to even more diversity of gender in the second century. So, for Lillie,

These texts point to the wide-ranging and multiple ways women were figured rhetorically as well as the myriad of possibilities and spaces they could hold—from child-bearer to leader. In the same way that followers of the early Jesus movements used the stories of Jesus' teachings, life, death, and resurrection creatively in a multitude of configurations, so too, the possibilities for women reflect

this multiplicity. Interestingly, these possibilities for the positionality of women are often predicated on the way in which the Jesus story is framed and interpreted. While men are often seen policing the boundaries of the possible, women seem to hold the potential of occupying multiple spaces.

Lillie's paper provides a very helpful complement to the Christianity Seminar sessions, in 2014 and 2017, about gender in the first two centuries. It points to the possibility that the overarching work of the Seminar in terms of

gender will demonstrate not one patriarchal conclusion, but a range of creative and incomplete arrangements of gender and power.

Virginia Burrus's paper, "The Gender of Martyrdom," had very similar positions, but its nuanced and complex picture focuses on the ways that gendering occurs in second- and third-century stories of martyrdom. Although Burrus uses somewhat different language than Lillie, her study provides a more specific portrait of the diverse gendering in the first two centuries than Lillie surveyed through a wider lens.

Burrus concludes,

My thesis is that early Christian martyrdom texts queer gender. That is to say, they resist and subvert understandings of gender that were widely held in the ancient Mediterranean and that are arguably, to a great degree, still operative in our own context as well. The simplest version of this conventional understanding is that masculinity is active and dominating, femininity passive and submissive, that masculinity aligns with virtue and femininity does not—or at least it aligns with only lesser, more passive virtues. Masculinity and femininity exist on a spectrum, moreover, and one's position on that spectrum is never stable or secure. Masculinity is always at risk.

Our texts leverage that risk by representing martyrdom as a kind of contest or competition in which manhood might be lost or won. Rather than subjects of public torture and execution, martyrs are seen to be victorious athletes, tested and proven in the combat of the arena and in the rhetorical combat that precedes it. But who are these manly victors? They are, overwhelmingly, nonmen—that is, women, children, elders, disabled, slaves. Their bodies are otherwise than the expected ones.

Correspondingly, they skew virtue. They do not win by dominating but simply by enduring—by refusing to break. The only thing they control is their own wills; the cost of their victory is not someone else's life but their own. *Andreia*—courage, manliness—has been significantly revised, then. At the very least, the emphasis has shifted. The martyrs' passive resistance is seen as strength, the aggression of the rulers who torture, sentence, and execute them as weakness.

Counterbalancing the representation of martyrs as masculine athletes is the representation of martyrs as birthing mothers and the consequent privileging of maternal bodies, both literal and metaphorical. Pain proves generative, in the labor of martyrdom as in birthing. Suffering alone becoming suffering-with—compassion. Martyrdom gives birth to new life, to new bonds of love, and to new forms of nurture.

What, then, is the gender of martyrdom? It is neither masculine nor feminine nor does it simply transcend such distinctions. Rather it is hybrid, queered, crossing, emerging.

Joanna Dewey's study, "Women: Their Visibility and Agency and Loss of Agency in Early Christian Texts," also takes an expansive perspective. Based within her career-long engagement with feminist theory and first-century contexts,

she brings a clear critique of both ancient and contemporary scholarly patriarchal approaches. Although it is important to her larger work to see much first- and second-century literature and perspectives as damaging to women's lives, her assessment of the earliest Christ-movement author Paul is nuanced and generally focused on how

Paul affirms women's freedom from the patriarchal household in his use of the baptismal formula, "in Christ there is no male or female." He affirms women's equality in matters of marriage and celibacy. He may at times be disturbed by the way women use their freedom. So Paul's writings also include hints of restrictions on women's agency, hints that are made explicit in the interpolation in 1 Corinthians 14, and that are developed strongly in later writings in Paul's name.

Dewey sees much of this also in the second-century apocryphal Acts of the Apostles and, in this regard, her take is quite close to Lillie's. Dewey's approach to Luke has been important in the history of scholarship, and this paper underlines her position.

Luke, the author of Acts, presents an ambiguous picture of women around Paul. Women are explicitly visible as members of the communities. Paul when persecuting Christians prior to his conversion explicitly drags off "men and women" (Acts 8:3; 9:2; 22:4). Women appear in the narrative, named (Lydia, Damaris, etc.) and unnamed (a few Greek women and men of high standing, four unmarried daughters of Philip with the gift of prophecy). Women are clearly visible. They are not, however, shown as ministering: Prisca/Priscilla and Aquila are present in Paul's letters as travelling missionaries independent of Paul. They appear in Acts but with no public ministry—they take Apollos aside to explain things better (Acts 18:2, 24). Public missionary activity is reserved for men. In Acts, women are visible but have restricted agency.

For Dewey, however, the strongest take-away concerning the study of gender in the first two centuries has to do with what she sees as a final triumph of patriarchy in early Christianity. Here she goes beyond the second century and

The martyrs' passive resistance is seen as strength, the aggression of the rulers who torture, sentence, and execute them as weakness.

Counterbalancing the representation of martyrs as masculine athletes is the representation of martyrs as birthing mothers.

outlines five factors that converged to enable and solidify early Christianity as patriarchal. They are:

- (1) The typical process of institutionalization, (2) the move from house churches into public space, (3) the gradual shift from oral to written authority, (4) the re-introduction and increasing importance of sacrificial understandings of Jesus' death and of the Eucharist; and last, (5) the trump card, Constantine's conversion.

In some contrast to the papers of Lillie, Burrus, and Dewey, David Wheeler-Reed's paper, "Re-Reading *Regulating Sex* One Year Later," addressed issues around marriage and ascetic behavior. Nevertheless, the subject matter of his paper clearly relates to issues of gender as much as those other three papers do. Since issues of marriage and asceticism mattered for the Christ groups and movements of the first two centuries, Wheeler-Reed's paper is important to the work of our seminar.

Both his paper and his previous book, *Regulating Sex*, focus on the divergent and emerging attitudes and behaviors of early Christ people relative to marriage, asceticism, and the more technical topic of *porneia* (a Greek word meaning adultery, fornication, and sexual immorality). Wheeler-Reed notes, "Ideas about marriage and procreation are much more fluid and malleable in the first few centuries of early Christianity than many suppose." Indeed, in many respects, this is particularly the case in the second century. Thanks to Wheeler-Reed, the fall Seminar discussion in Denver took this topic up in the context of the rather intense disagreements and complicated opinions about asceticism and marriage in the second century. As he points out, Clement of Alexandria "does argue that any man who has sex with his wife for the purpose of pleasure adulterates his marriage." Similarly, Wheeler-Reed argues that *porneia*, often traditionally understood as "adultery," has a far broader, more complicated, and more debated meaning in this early period.

As his paper reassesses his earlier book, Wheeler-Reed notes: "I wish I would've spoken a bit more often about just how much the early Christians were the ones questioning established definitions of marriage in the Roman Empire."

Theology and Unmaking the World

for arms reduction and peace. It may well be that this clear and present danger would keep us from realizing that there may be more than Armageddon in our future. Additionally, our denials prevent us from noticing that there already are people around the globe who are engaged in meeting these threats. And, as we slowly admit this monstrous vision in, we begin to see that this is a critter of our own making—but hardly under our control. Can we then begin to imagine and live in ways that sustain our life on this planet? Can we face the "powers that be," that is, nation states and

Westar News

Attend the Spring Meeting...from anywhere!

We love seeing Westar members, supporters, scholars, and other friends in person every year in Santa Rosa. But we recognize that many of you who would very much like to attend our spring meetings simply cannot. Well, we have good news! At our March 2019 meeting, Westar will offer livestreaming options. Participants can sign up to attend public lectures live or at a later date by downloading archived video.

For more information, visit westarinstitute.org, click on the "events" tab, and then click on the spring meeting link.

Westar Welcomes New Scholar

Westar welcomes **Mary Keller**, a scholar with expertise in feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and Indigenous studies theory. Keller, who teaches in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Wyoming, earned her Ph.D. from Syracuse University. She is the author of *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power and Spirit Possession*, winner of the Best First Book in the History of Religions, 2003, from the American Academy of Religion. Her current work focuses on the role of sacred land in a global economy and on the religious dimensions of climate change.



Perhaps the Seminar needs to let the likes of Wheeler-Reed help us explore how gender was recalibrated in the second century, recognizing that century as a time of thorough renegotiation of marriage and asceticism, as a lens through which we can appreciate that they were not necessarily opposing and mutually exclusive. In other words, the advances and queering of masculine and feminine categories in the papers by Lillie and Burrus may need to be accompanied by new sets of hybrid relational categories in asceticism and marriage. **4R**

Continued from page 4

international corporations that only see their self-interest in maintaining this doomsday scenario? How can we learn to reimagine the structures necessary for our life together? How can we build a world that has a future for our race?

Without facing these questions, I contend that we no longer are engaged in theology. We would forfeit the uncanny and baffling conversation *de profundis*, that is, from the depths of our lives in this planetary situation. But if we do plumb these menacing questions, we shall begin to notice, take care, and perhaps repair the coming world.