

**Review of Teresa Berger, *Gender Differences and the Making of Liturgical History: Lifting a Veil on Liturgy's Past*, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate 2011, xvii + 220 pp., ISBN 978-1-4094-2698-1**

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Teresa Berger is easily the most highly regarded and eminently qualified feminist scholar of liturgical history in the field. While the thoroughness and comprehensive range of her research establishes Berger's status as a first-rate scholar, three characteristics render her work accessible and not intimidating to the average educated reader. The first is her regular and seamless alternation between theory and example. She never fails to embody potentially off-putting abstract notions that emerge from feminist theory or its analytical jargon in concrete lived experience, whether that of a contemporary or of an historical personage such as Egeria, the 4th-century pilgrim to Jerusalem, whom one feels one has just met personally. The second is a stylistic note: Berger frequently arranges key points into clearly defined and numbered entities: first, secondly, and third or finally, to build a clear structure into the text and render it accessible for the general reader.

The third characteristic is the healthy wisdom of her willingness to acknowledge and move on from positions she took in the past when, after more reflection, dialogue and study, she finds they prove one-sided, not fully thought-through or for some reason no longer applicable. Berger followed her ground-breaking paper for *Societas Liturgica* in 1989 on the inculturation of the liturgy in the culture of women only a few years later with a recognition that 'women' is a highly complex, variable and unstable concept that could never admit of a flat application of the concept of inculturation. Similarly, the use of 'women' as a deceptively stable category in her 1998 *Women's Ways of Worship* which explored three pivotal periods in the evolution of public worship from feminist perspectives, has been superseded in this most recent volume. Berger now takes full possession of the concept of 'woman' as an inherently unstable category and the significance of the multiplicity of gender for historiography in

general, and liturgical history in particular. The academy is full of scholars whose work is powered by ego energy, but very few with the honesty and authenticity to move publically from an earlier position to a later, better worked-out position, and for this Berger should be wholeheartedly commended.

The core thesis of *Gender Differences* derives from a sustained investigation of several significant lacunae in liturgical history where women ought to be. Liturgical historiography has never been gender-neutral, whether in its selection and prioritizing of sources, or its methods of study and evaluation. For example, far fewer sources authored by women are extant even apart from the question of the authority granted to their witness value: Berger gives as an example of the latter the Eucharistic reflections of Hildegard of Bingen (p. 9), soon to be declared a Doctor of the Church. Berger's consistent contribution to the field of liturgical studies has been to expose that simple fact of collective bias and selective reading, and in this book she deploys sharper theoretical tools, so to speak. Her second chapter makes clear that by shifting focus from women's history to gender history a host of serious, heretofore unidentified and unaddressed issues appear that disprove once and for all that liturgical historiography can claim to be gender-neutral, or even context-neutral.

In order to explore some dimensions of faulty liturgical history Berger presents four categories of case studies in the history of liturgy in four successive chapters, all of them coloured by fresh approaches and new questions arising from an understanding of gender as multivalent and conditioned by other variables such as race, economics and social class. Her third chapter, on sacred spaces and gendered bodies, includes insights presented as a paper at the congress of *Societas Liturgica* in Reims in 2011. Shrines identified with holy women and curated by women, worship spaces divided into male or female zones, the social position of eunuchs, the household as a too-often overlooked sacred space, cemeteries, and the movement between spaces in pilgrimage – all these themes reappear in tandem with the three categories to follow. The second category, 'Eucharistic fragments', may surprise some readers. The crisscrossing historical parallels between breast milk and eucharist, Christ as feeding us with his body and blood as breast milk, milk and honey as food for neophytes in the faith all accurately reflect known themes in scripture, mystical theology and art, but make no sense without the fact that the ancients thought that breast milk developed in the mother's body directly from blood. The reader might be further startled to learn that in the late 4th century virgin ascetics in their homes would make the sign of the cross three times over bread, then 'eucharistized' the bread with blessing prayers, of which we have the text.

The third category, ways in which bodily flows of various sorts could set a Christian outside of the worshipping community, also rests on solid scholarship yet may surprise readers who may not have put the pieces together. The old rite of the 'churching of women after childbirth', defended during the Enlightenment and into the 20th century as a voluntary rite of thanksgiving, not purification from the fearful contamination of childbirth, died out among Roman Catholics before the Second Vatican Council. Ample documentation exists of discussion going back to the early church on the exclusion of women who were menstruating at the time of worship, or postponing their baptism. This repugnance toward bodily emissions extended as well to male involuntary ejaculation and to the question of whether marital intercourse hinders prayer. Berger's fourth paradigmatic category, liturgical leadership as 'gender-troubled', takes what

might seem a straightforward topic and unfolds multiple layers of thought-provoking complexity. Regarding the simple act of singing in church, in the 1903 papal instruction on sacred music, women were not to sing in the choir because of the ministerial nature of that role, but castrati still existed and still sang in the Sistine Chapel. Eunuchs in fact were present in the worshipping community from the beginning, and by the 4th century were seen as positive models of male continence and purity. Ancient liturgical leadership in general followed not just one but several models traceable in the early church, and on the other end of the timeline, the maleness of the contemporary licitly-ordained Catholic priest involves multiple masculinities, not just one model or one role. One can now take the idea of Eucharist, body and milk a step further: can Mary properly be imaged as a priest, in fact the first priest, because her body served as the tabernacle of the incarnate Christ, or not an ordained priest? For centuries she was indeed depicted in priestly vestments. Only in the early 20th century during the movement for women's suffrage were images of Mary in vestments forbidden and the notion of Mary as a sort of monstrosity-avant-la-lettre suppressed.

Berger sums up her methodological challenge to scholars of worship and liturgy very neatly in the genre of a commandment:

'First, Thou shalt not write liturgical history without paying attention to gender differences. This is the first and the great commandment. The second is this, Thou shalt not dishonor the diversity of gendered lives in worship' (p. 164).