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# › God's Hinder Parts and Masculinity's Troubled Fragmentations: Trajectories of Critical Men's Studies in Religion

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Die Vorabveröffentlichung erfolgt mit freundlicher Genehmigung des Autors, der Herausgeber und des Verlages.

We find a curious passage about God's body in an unlikely place, namely in one of the writings of Baruch Spinoza, the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher from Amsterdam who is known for his rejection of any anthropomorphizing of God. God, for him, was bound to abstract and impersonal principles of knowledge, and such knowledge was bound to knowing "Nature." The tendency to attribute human traits to God, according to Spinoza, can be explained by people's natural inclination toward (religious) superstition. To assign a body to God was, to him, "nonsensical" (Markschies 2016, 30). "Those who feign a God, like man, consisting of a body and a mind, and subject to passions," Spinoza argues, just demonstrated "how far they [have] wander[ed] from the true knowledge of God" (quoted in Nadler 2016). Yet, Spinoza—himself of Jewish Sephardi-Portuguese background—observed in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* that the Torah "nowhere prescribed the belief that God is without body, or even without form or figure"; it only requires Jews to "worship him alone" and forbade them not to "invent or fashion any likeness of the Deity." Spinoza continued to muse that the "Bible clearly implies that God has a form" and that, when Moses heard him speaking, "he was permitted to behold it, or at least his hinder parts" (Spinoza 1891).

Spinoza's mentioning of the "hinder parts" of God is, of course, a reference to Exodus 33, 17-23, where Moses encounters God and pleads, "I pray thee, show me thy glory." God promises him to "make all my goodness pass before you [Moses]," while also firmly stating that "you cannot see my face." God's back ("hinder parts"), however, Moses is allowed to see.

For Spinoza—the forerunner of Enlightenment thought and modern biblical criticism, who, by a *cherem*, got banned and expelled from the Amsterdam Jewish community—the question was not whether God has a body (God did not!). He only wished to explain that it is biblical Scripture that testifies to God's body. And even in Scripture, Spinoza wrote, we rarely find strong affirmations about a deity's body. Moses' encounter with God is an exception, for Moses holds a special place among the prophets in Torah. He is the only prophet who hears the "real voice" of God: "Moses spoke with God face to face as a man speaks with his friend" (Spinoza 1891). But even Moses cannot see the face of God; his sighting of God's glory is limited to getting a glimpse of God's back parts.

It is with this reference to God's back parts that I will enter a discussion of my critical men's studies perspective on an epistemological difficulty that haunts our attempts to get a firm grasp on masculinities in religions.

## 1. God's Veiled Sex and Men's Non-Absence

Referencing God's body in the Jewish and Christian traditions—as Spinoza did in his *Theological-Political Treatise*, first published anonymously in 1670—without embracing any literal, anthropomorphic understanding of such a divine body has had a long history of theological and philosophical debates in the West, as a recent study on Jewish, Christian, and pagan perceptions of *Gottes Körper* (God's Bodies) demonstrates (Markschies 2016). Spinoza, in this sense, was part of a larger Enlightenment trajectory that universalized and de-mythologized religious belief systems, in which the particularity of a faith tradition—and certainly the particular materiality of an imagined divine body—were anathema to modernity. Yet, it is also true that beginning in the second half of the twentieth century religious studies scholarship turned to the materiality and history of the body, inspired by the works of people like Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, feminist scholars and medievalists (e.g. Bynum 1992), gender-conscious scholars of patristics (e.g. Burrus 2004), and gay religious historians (e.g. Boswell 1980).

“The God of the Hebrew Bible has a body, this must be stated at the outset”—this is the opening sentence with which Benjamin Sommer, unequivocally, sets the stage for his book, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (2009, 1). But by no means is such an inquiry limited to biblical scholarship but has reached across the world religious traditions (Krondorfer 2016). Questions of whether God has a body are no longer asked to make theological or ontological points. Rather, they lead to investigating expressions of popular piety and devotion, to tracing gendered representations throughout history, or to analyzing how human and divine bodies, as cultural productions, variously comply with or resist normative gender expectations. If God has a body, God might also have a gender and a sex.

The fact that we can think and speak about God's body and gender makes us children of Enlightenment. Such speech is possible because we can remove ourselves from an all-embracing religious universe and stand at a distance to theological doctrine and faith communities, or, at least, inhabit a dialectical space between scholarship and faith. We have learned to see religion as an objectifiable phenomenon, wherein gender becomes one of the lenses by and through which we can understand religious identities and practices, discourse and institutions. A “critical men's studies in religion” approach is part of this larger mode of discernment; it asks questions specifically pertaining to men and masculinities in the religious traditions, querying and critiquing men's identities and performances as well as assumed male authority and power. It can also include questions about male-gendered imaginings of the divine.

Let us, then, return to the “hinder parts” of God, which, according to the passage in Exodus, Moses was allowed to see. Given Spinoza's agenda of dismantling supersti-

tious religious belief (of which anthropomorphic descriptions of God were just one problem), his caustic and somewhat mocking reference to God's back side is not surprising; yet, it brushes aside a whole set of questions we can ask today: Why, according to Scripture, was Moses permitted to see only the back side of God? Why could Moses—and by implication, all Jewish and Christian readers—not see the face of God? Was Moses not allowed to see God's front side because he would have seen God's own gender? Would he have seen the genital markers on God's body?

In the passage of Exodus, God allows Moses to be witness to his passing *kavod*, his "presence"; but as a good measure of protection, he places Moses "in a cleft of the rock" to "shield you [Moses] with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen" (Ex 33, 21-23). Why can Moses not see God's face? Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, an American Jewish scholar, wonders in his book *God's Phallus and other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (1994) what it is that is being protected, veiled, and hidden in this Torah passage. Is it possible that what is hidden are God's genitals? Could this be the reason why Moses cannot see God's face? The Hebrew term *panay* is conventionally translated as "my face." According to Eilberg-Schwartz, *panay* can also be translated as "my front side," in parallel construction of the Hebrew *ahoray* for God's "back side." The front side would reveal gendered markers, the back side might not. Was the divine being clothed when passing Moses, Eilberg-Schwartz wonders? The biblical Jewish tradition seems to think so. But regardless of whether God was wearing clothes or not, when his *kavod* passes Moses stuck in between rocks, God's "turning of the back," according to Eilberg-Schwartz, "symbolically represents a hiding of the very spot by which sexual identification can be confirmed" (1994, 77). Even if we were to assume a clothed divinity and accept the translation of *panay* as "face" (rather than "front side"), the face itself could still reveal the markings of gender identity. What is ultimately at stake, Eilberg-Schwartz argues, is the "veiling of God's sex" (78).

Here is not the place to discuss the validity of Eilberg-Schwartz's argument. I am mentioning Spinoza and Eilberg-Schwartz only because the veiling of God's body, the veiling of God's sex, and the veiling of God's gender point, heuristically, to a larger epistemological problem that stymies the critical inquiry of men and masculinities in religion. Whereas we have come to a place in secularized scholarship that allows us to approach religion as an object of non-theological, evidence-based inquiry, it is more difficult to get a firm hold on the slippery category of "masculinities." How do we know what we know about masculinities? Let us assume for a moment that we had been in Moses' place a few thousand years ago, placed in the cleft of a rock. Unlike him, however, we would have peeked out from the cleft a little earlier and caught a glimpse of God's front side. What if we had detected, to our surprise, some male genital markers on God's body? This might tell us something about God.

But even if this had been the case, what exactly would we have learned about masculinity?

It might be telling that the recent (and already mentioned) publication of *Gottes Körper* in Jewish and Christian antiquity cites Exodus 33, 20 at three separate occasions as evidence of God's biblical *Körperlichkeit* (corporeality) (Markschies 2016). All three citations focus exclusively on God's "face" that Moses is prevented from seeing. The fact that Moses, according to Ex 33, 23, can see only God's "hinder parts" does not get any attention here, or nowhere else in this otherwise comprehensive study. In a recent remarkable article, Susan Haddox (2016) surveys the development of Hebrew Bible scholars' interest in masculinity studies over the last two decades (see also Creangă 2010). Part of the problem of getting a good grasp on the subject, she writes, is that "biblical interpretation of men, by men, and for men was the normative mode for most of the history of the biblical texts and of biblical criticism." An explicit investigation of men as gendered beings, however, is complicated by the "unmarked nature of masculinity in cultural structures, including language" (Haddox 2016, 177). The 2016 study of *Gottes Körper*—although not unaware of the gender-implications of imagining God's body—remains in the territory of not critically investigating the "unmarked nature of masculinity." Almost coyly and somewhat ambiguously, Markschies addresses the issue of the maleness of the divine body in a summary fashion toward the end of his work:

[W]hen asking what is the gender that lingers in the background when talking about the divine corporeality... [then] an image emerges...of mostly a male figure...[D]escriptions of specific male attributes and bodily details are not necessarily in the foreground.... Nevertheless, among the texts we examined there is not a single literary attempt to problematize or deny the visual constraint of imagining [God] as man. At a minimum, we must state: the image of God in this regard is lopsided. (Markschies 2016, 425)

Haddox' remark about the unmarked nature of masculinity echoes earlier observations by Stephen Moore in the introduction to *New Testament Masculinities*. "What does masculinity have to do with biblical studies?" he asks. "Almost nothing—and nearly everything.... Masculinity is, at once, everywhere and nowhere" (Moore 2003, 1). For masculinity to be everywhere and nowhere, while remaining an unmarked experience—just as God's sex remains "unmarked" in Exodus 33—, makes it difficult to bring into speech the very phenomenon we try to analyze. Similar to the veiling of God's sex and gender in Exodus, there is an epistemological veiling of men as consciously gendered beings in our readings of religious traditions. To be more precise, there is a veiling of the marked nature of hegemonic, mostly heterosexual male-gendered experiences. We are everywhere and yet nowhere. We hide behind an omnipresent visibility—a visibility taken for granted to such a degree by society and scholarship that it becomes virtually invisible.

Philip Culbertson incisively observes that "patriarchy is built upon the assumption that a male body is a text which will reject all attempts by other men to read it. To accept such an attempt would be to destroy the basis of power and control" (2009, 117). Culbertson, himself a gay biblical studies scholar, actually has the heterosexual normative body in mind. It is the normative male body that averts to be gazed at and to be studied as a problematic body. The heterosexual male body does not so much "reveal" as it "re-veils," according to Samuel Tongue's book-length interpretation of Jacob wrestling with the Angel. Re-veiling instead of revealing! Just as Moses was not able to see and read the face of God or, put differently, the "front side" of God's body, men in hegemonic positions are unable and often unwilling to see and read their own bodies. In both cases, to see or read the male body is perceived as a loss of power. Hence, the epistemological conundrum we are faced with is how we can read critically that which is omnipresent yet invisible. How can we attempt to critically read the male body and to fix our gaze on men as gendered beings when such attempts are not only resisted but also caught in a house of mirrors? In this house of mirrors, images of masculinities are reflected everywhere, but as soon as we try to get hold of them they disintegrate into distortions and fragmentation, then disassemble and vanish.

Masculinity, Todd Reeser writes in his introduction to *Masculinities in Theory*, is unmarked (2010, 8-9). Precisely because it is unmarked, we can call it with Roland Barthes "a significant absence" (1967, 77). Masculinity, as an unmarked experience, is an absence that needs our attention, and that is true for all world religions that follow patriarchal traditions. I have, therefore, suggested to speaking of a *non-absence* (Krondorfer 2010, 74-99). The concept of non-absence refers to the observation that male-gendered experiences are hegemonic and yet remain unmarked experiences. Although the male body and male agency are always *in* the text (and *in* theology, *in* religious habits, *in* devotional practices, and *in* sacred institutions), they

are *not present* as a consciously gendered experience. *Non-absence* signals that there is no awareness of that which is present but not consciously articulated. A non-absent male body, then, is man's obliviousness toward his gendered body's materiality; a non-absent male body is also man's blindness toward a body's textual transformation into law, social institutions, normative discourse, cultural customs, artistic expressions, and so forth.

## **2. A Brief History of "Critical Men's Studies in Religion"**

The subfield of Critical Men's Studies in Religion has tried to counter such omnipresent non-absence of hegemonic and mostly heteronormative masculinities. Although I have focused so far on examples from the field of biblical scholarship, biblical studies scholars were not the first to address issues of men and masculinities in religious studies. Although David Cline's (1995) influential work on masculinities in the Hebrew Bible dates back to the mid-1990s, contributions from scholars in the history of homosexuality and gay theological studies preceded biblical scholarship on men by a good 15 years. Because I have written elsewhere about the developing field of "critical men's studies in religion" (Krondorfer 2009), I will limit myself here to a brief summary.

It is now safe to say that this field of scholarly inquiry is older than a generational cohort of 25 years, that is, it has a history of about 35 plus years. An early interest in men and religion by religious studies scholars is already discernible in the 1980s, though it took about ten more years before these scholars began to identify themselves as belonging to a group working on common themes. Realizing that their inquiries were sufficiently different from other approaches to the phenomenon of religion, there was a need for classification that would best encapsulate the thematically unifying nature of such endeavors across a range of applied methodologies. Two groups within the American Academy of Religion pushed the scholarly agenda of this field, namely the "Gay Men's Issues in Religion" group, founded in 1988, and the "Men's Studies in Religion" group, founded two years later. Whereas John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (1980) can be seen as an important key to launching the scholarly interest in the study of religion by, for, and about gay men (and especially the interest in the history of homosexualities), it took the heterosexual community of male scholars of religion until the mid-1990s to gain a more visible profile.

In the early stages, it was far from certain whether the scholarly interest in men and masculinities would eventually emerge as something distinct from other scholarship. Would the scattered individual research projects be able to stand on their own? Or would they be subsumed under particular disciplines (like New Testament Studies,



Practical Theology, Jewish Studies, Buddhist Studies, Medieval Religious History, etc)? Or would they be absorbed by already established cross-disciplinary research areas, such as women's studies, gender studies, or queer studies? Defining the contours of critical men's studies in religion as a distinct field has met with some difficulties. In a 2004 review of books on religion and masculinity, the reviewer Kathryn Lofton writes critically, and somewhat unfairly, that "scholarship in masculinity—like the broader studies of gender that fostered it—remains an ambiguous, ambitious, interdisciplinary, and immature field of intellectual endeavor." She concluded: "Rather than a provocative interrogation of gendered discourse, masculinity studies have become just another way to talk about white men" (Lofton 2004).

Whatever truth there might be in Lofton's 2004 observation, the field of "critical men's studies in religion" has certainly moved forward with respect to levels of sophistication. Viewing religion as a genuine expression of human interaction, while cognizant of its complex interactions with language, culture, politics, etc., the field is now producing a steady stream of new works, using a variety of methodological approaches, and seeking alliances with feminist, queer, postcolonial, legal, cultural, ethnographic, and restorative justice studies. It is also now recognized in norm-setting archives of knowledge, that is, in the form of entries in encyclopedias and handbooks (e.g. Krondorfer 2015, 2016; Krondorfer and Culbertson 2004; Culbertson 2007; Ganzevoort and Sremac 2016).

For years I have advocated, and am still advocating, to calling our inquiries a "critical" study of men and masculinities in religious traditions and cultures. By calling it "critical," we emphasize that bringing gender consciousness to the analysis and interpretation of men in relation to all aspects of religion is indispensable; otherwise, we might remain in danger of slipping back into a long tradition of reiterations of male dominance within the sphere of religion.

In other words, "critical men's studies in religion" exhibits not only a reflective and empathetic stance toward men as individual and communal beings trying to make sense of their lives within the different demands put upon them by society and religion, but it must also engage these issues with critical sensitivity and scholarly discipline in the context of gender-unjust systems. Such systems--like patriarchy, androcentrism, the oppression of women, heterosexism, masculinist God-language, homophobia, xenophobia, religious discrimination, colonization, or enslavement—can operate in subtle and overt ways, and they benefit certain men in certain historical and political circumstances. These systems need to be kept in mind when working in this area. (Krondorfer 2009, xvii)

### 3. On Male Imaginations and Gender Justice

In the beginnings of a more deliberate study of men and masculinities in religion, the scholarly imagination of what constitutes masculinity was quite limited. With the help of psychological models, authors constructed male typologies and archetypes that either confirmed or counteracted normative male behavior (see, for example, Anderson 1990; Arnold 1991; Culbertson 1992; Judy 1992; Moore and Gillette 1990; for a short analytical overview, see Krondorfer 1996, 12-15; for Islam, see De Soudy 2011). Such approaches were seeking a greater variety of acceptable male roles and behaviors by reinterpreting figures like Moses, Samuel, David, Joseph, John the Baptist, Jesus, or Paul, but overall they did not challenge of what today we would call “hegemonic masculinities.” Rather, they maintained and reaffirmed benign-paternalistic male models.

An even more conservative approach was to seek gender equality through models of gender complementarity, a stance that by and large still characterizes the official Catholic position on men and women. Theories (and theologies) of gender-complementarity locate themselves in anthropological understandings of the different natures of men and women, which in turn justify differentiations of men and women’s participation in the spheres of sacred authority and secular power. Such social differentiation, so the argument goes, does not diminish the value of women, it just assigns her a different space (or as my current neighbor in Flagstaff, the assistant Rabbi of the local *Chabad* [Lubavitch] movement, would say, “we don’t discriminate against women, we put them on a pedestal”). In Christianity, a favorite passage called upon in the context of arguing for gender equality within gender complementarity is Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. There, the Apostle sets down some rules for the early Christian communities. “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does” (1. Cor 7, 3-4).

We find similar debates about gender justice among contemporary interpreters of the Qur'an. Surah 2:228 almost mirrors Paul's admonition: "The rights of the wives (with regard to their husbands) are equal to the (husband's) rights with regard to them." This verse is often cited by modernist Qur'an interpreters to support a position of Islam's gender equality (e.g. Engineer 2001). Other Qur'anic verses include Surah 4:124, "And whoever does good deeds, whether male or female, and is a believer, will enter Paradise." Or we can cite the regulations on fasting in Surah 2:187, in which men and women are permitted to have sexual relations during the nights of Ramadhan. "They (wives) are garment for you and you are garment for them." Yet, as Kecia Ali incisively observes in *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith and Jurisprudence* (2016), male agency is never questioned in these passages. In Surah 2:187, Ali writes, "women are spoken about and men are spoken to in a way that presumes male control" (2016, 128).

Supposed equality in gender-complementary systems is always burdened by a difference that favors male agency, male control, and male power. If we returned to Christianity and take a look at Augustine's writings 300 years after Paul, we can read the following about the creation of men and women in his *Confessions*:

In mental power, woman has an equal capacity of rational intelligence, but by the sex of her body she is submissive to the masculine sex. This is analogous to the way in which the impulse for action is subordinate to the rational mind's prudent concern that the act is right. So we see that each particular point and the whole taken all together are very good. (Augustine 1992, 302)

The current field of critical men's studies of religion would, of course, neither return to a positivist affirmation of male role models derived from sacred Scriptures nor defend religious models of gender complementarity. Rather, masculinities are now understood within a framework of "fluid, obstinate, and unfamiliar gender conceptions" (Walz 2008, 16). In such a framework, masculinities are seen as constructed, varied, and unstable wherein different hegemonic ideals of masculinities compete and wherein "priapic masculinity" rules, that is, where men assert their masculinity by also dominating other men (Williams 1999).

Gay studies discovered religion and theology already in the mid-1970s, quite a number of years before biblical studies constructed masculinities along conventional lines of individual male heroes and anti-heroes. Gay scholars embraced theology and religion as potential sites of spiritual resilience and renewal. In *Queering Christ* (2002), Robert Goss observes that early gay theologies were largely defensive and apologetic (see McNeill 1976; Horner 1978). It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that they began to employ a liberationist and affirmative theological paradigm (see Clark 1989; McNeill 1988; Goss 1993; Comstock 1993). In the mid-1990s, gay theology expanded into a more differentiated field with a variety of methodological and com-

parative approaches, including of what could be called essays on “theo-eroticism” (Boisvert 2004). Currently, as gay theology has found its voice and agency, it discusses the stability and fluidity of its boundaries in conversation with feminism, LGBT, and queer studies (see Goss and West 2000; Comstock and Henking 1997). Furthermore, it has taken a self-critical stance on earlier writings that essentialized gay identity and idealized modes of “homonormativity.”

Investigating masculinities in religious contexts relies today on theoretical frameworks provided by R. W. Connell’s (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinities; Pierre Bourdieu’s (1990) notion of habitus as a central mechanism for male domination; Judith Butler’s (1990) concept of gender performativity; Michel Foucault’s analysis of discursive regiments, especially with regard to power and sexuality (all three volumes of his *The History of Sexuality*); and also George Mosse’s (1996) work on the simultaneous rise of masculinity and modern nationalism. It also employs post-colonialism studies when investigating the colonial and colonized male subject. What these and other theoretical approaches have in common is that they problematize gender categories, and especially gendered categories pertaining to men and masculinities, in order to grasp the phenomenon of “masculinities” without reinscribing new normative models and ideals. But I am not so sure that we always succeed, for I often feel we are engaged in a continuous process of “re-veiling” the subject that we are trying to understand. Philip Culbertson might be right when he said that as soon as we fix our gaze on men, our subject refuses to be looked at. Or, to use another metaphor, we manage to see the “hinder parts” of what is omnipresent while the front side remains invisible to us.

These somewhat skeptical remarks do not, however, prevent people like me and many others from pursuing our interests and curiosity in this area. It is very exciting to be part of this developing field. Whenever I come across fresh research angles in new publications, I am—despite the epistemological conundrum I sketched above—astounded by what we can discover, learn, and bring into articulation. What I find particularly worthy of exploration is the investigation of masculinities in a comparative framework of religious studies, and I am deeply indebted to my colleagues who work in religious contexts I know little about, including those present in this volume.

Let me return now to the male body and, by doing so, push a little further into our comfort zones.

#### 4. Testicular Logic and Sexualized Violence

In his 1946 book, *That Hideous Strength*, C. S. Lewis remarks about the Divine that “what is above and beyond all things is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to it” (316). Although his observation does not hold equal value across different religious traditions, it does point to a peculiar dynamic in the monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam with regard to masculinities. If God’s own gender is, by and large, imagined as male, then the devotional relation of faithful men to a male divinity leads to intricate negotiations in terms of gendered language, identifications, and metaphors. If men of faith are in a subordinate and submissive position in relation to a male God, how are they to worship him and yet maintain agency and control as men in this world? Do homosocial bonds and male-only communities offer men possibilities to protect themselves against the gaze of women as they submit to a powerful male deity? By metaphorically becoming “female,” does this avert or encourage homoerotic relations? Must male submissiveness toward a male-imagined God be inscribed into the male body through a physical and metaphoric wounding? I like to address this last issue of wounding at the closing of this chapter.

We know, for example, that the Jewish *brit milah* (circumcision) is interpreted by the Talmudic sages and Rabbis not so much as giving circumcised men exclusive access to God, but rather as a remedy for a fundamental flaw in the nature of men. Nachman Wilhelm, for example, writes that “circumcision was designed to repair nature” because “man is not born intact and still requires fixing of body and soul” (quoted in Bilu 2003, 179; also Cohen 2005). Opposite to what others may claim or believe about men, according to the rabbinic understanding of circumcision, men are not perfect but deeply flawed, which is why Torah-learning takes life-long and immense efforts. The cutting and wounding of the body part that most defines men’s biological difference—and also defines how men assert themselves socially (virility, progeny) as well as symbolically (honor, phallic power)—is interpreted by a number of orthodox Rabbis as a repair of a natural flaw. Scholars outside of the Torah-Talmud loyal tradition, however, have ventured further afield, suggesting that men’s relation to a male God requires physical wounding to signify submission. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, for example, lists a number of biblical examples of wounds inflicted in the genital area. “The blood of circumcision,” he writes, “is a symbolic acknowledgment that a man’s masculinity belongs to God. Submitting to God and surrendering one’s masculinity amounts to the same thing” (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, 160).

Lest we one-sidedly single out the Jewish rite of circumcision (*brit*), the blood of the martyrs in early Christianity may just signal a similar case. “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church,” Tertullian famously wrote in his *Apology* (197 CE). Perhaps we can even mention here the Shia ritual of Ashura, where men cut themselves with

knives, chains, and swords as an expression of remorse and mourning for not having been present to save Hussein at the battle of Karbala.

In his analysis of Jacob wrestling with the angel at the Jabbok river, Samuel Tongue interprets the wounding of Jacob's *yarekh* as a genital assault. Conventionally translated as "hip," the Hebrew *yarekh* can also be translated as "thigh," "hip joint," or "genitals"—which has led Roland Boer to speak of a "testicular logic" of biblical Hebrew. Male "bodies are wounded and altered in the name of God," Tongue summarily writes, "and these wounds can 'unman'; patriarchal power is consistently wounded by the divine male" (2014, 259).

There is, of course, a point I want to make by engaging these biblical details. I want to return to the epistemological conundrum of bringing into language the non-absence of the male body and male agency. A wounding of the male body, it seems, might be the clearest marker that brings into physical presence elusive masculinities. And yet, it gets elided through a re-veiling in religious discourse and, I might add, in modern obliviousness. It might be easy to dismiss the genital wounding of Jacob as a hyped-up interpretation of postmodern biblical scholars, just as it is easy to deflect attention to cases of sexual assault on men in atrocity crimes today. In both cases, we avert our gaze from the front side of men, because it might complicate our understanding of what makes men "masculine." Samuel Tongue, in the biblical context of Jacob's wounding, summarizes the situation well. He writes, the "troubling scene of male performance" at Jabbok "involves recognizing that the symbolic marks on male bodies are written and perceived in ways that often elide the troubled fragmentation at the heart of many different performances of masculinity" (2014, 259). When Tongue talks about eliding the "troubled fragmentation" at the heart of "performances of masculinity," he is pointing to a similar problem that I am concerned about: it is difficult to see ourselves other than through troubled fragmentations.

The Dutch theologian Ruard Ganzevoort and Serbian religious studies scholar Srdjan Sremac recently published a piece on "Masculinity, Spirituality, and Male Wartime Sexual Trauma," in which they address the stigmatization and silence around the sexually violated, heterosexual male body in war. Because there is silence does not mean, however, that these assaults do not happen. "This stigma," Ganzevoort and Sremac write, "serves to keep the trauma hidden and reduce the chances of intervictim solidarity because every victim survives in shame" (2016, 340). From beatings of the testicles to forced fellatio, from anal raping by inserting objects to forcing prisoners to mutilate each other sexually, the range of savage creativity in violating other men knows no bounds. I will cite verbatim only one episode reported from the Omarska Detention Camp in the Bosnian war. The testimony is taken from the trial transcripts of the International Criminal Tribunal of former Yugoslavia.

[One day they brought in] two brothers. They were singled out by Zena for torture. He beat them and then they had to slap each other's face, for instance, and if the slaps were not strong enough, then he would show them how it's really done. One day they had to suck each other's penis. (Cited in Ganzevoort and Sremac 2016, 341)

Any such descriptions are hard to stomach. Genital humiliation and genital mutilation of the male body are often subject to multiple layers of silencing. The victims themselves, if they survive, don't dare speaking about it out of shame and stigmatization, and because these assaults threaten the core of their male identities. Ganzevoort and Sremac actually mention that most testimonies about male victims of sexualized violence come from secondary witnesses, and not from the men affected themselves, an observation echoed also from other atrocities zones such as Dafur (see Ferrales, Brehm, and McElrath 2016). Another level of silence refers to the general silencing of sexualized violence during war and ethno-religious conflicts. It was only after the wars and genocides in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda that wartime rape of women was finally recognized legally as a war crime. There is yet a third level of silencing that has to do with the public, academic, and human rights discourse about sexual violence which, for good reasons, focuses mostly on women but, in the process, averts the eyes on the sexual assault on male bodies. Such combined silencing—by public discourse and by the boys and men themselves who were sexually assaulted—reinforces the “troubled fragmentation,” as Samuel Tongue put it, of performances of masculinities.

## **5. Outlook**

I ended my chapter on the sobering and heart-wrenching story of two brothers being forced to slap each other and then suck each other's penises because thinking critically about masculinities is, for me, not merely an academic luxury but an endeavor with real life consequences. Religious studies, across the world religions, need to be part of this conversation.

Perhaps the difficulty of talking about masculinities is, in the end, not so different from talking about religion. In both cases, we need to repeatedly talk, think, read, and remember in order to grasp an elusive phenomenon, and then re-talk, re-think, re-read and remember again. I will conclude with a quote by queer theologian Gerald Loughlin, taken from his entry on “The Body” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*. He writes: “This, indeed, is the field of religion, in which believers are bound (*religare*) over to the reading, again and again (*relegere*), of the texts by which they are both bound and set free” (Loughlin 2006, 381). And I may add these words: as men, we are bound to reading our bodies as text, again and again, by which we are both bound and set free.

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