

Gender Differences and the Making of Liturgical History
Lifting a Veil on Liturgy's Past
by Teresa Berger

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Two key questions shape the goal of this book: First, how do we “write gender back into the ‘facts’ of liturgical history?” (28) Second, when we do so, what are the consequences for liturgical history and the “authorizing claims” liturgical and dogmatic theologians are inclined to make based on that history? As she answers these questions in *Gender Differences and the Making of Liturgical History*, Teresa Berger not only works to both retrieve the voices, practices, and traditions of Christian women at worship, but also widens the scope of “gendering processes” beyond the common binary of “woman” and “man” to include “intersexed persons, ascetic virgins, eunuchs, and priestly men” (xiii). It is this wider scope that sets this book apart from some of her earlier work, especially *Women's Ways of Worship* (Pueblo / Liturgical Press, 1999), in which she focused on the retrieval of women's voices and liturgical practices.

Berger's questions may seem to focus on the interests of liturgical historians, but her work should also be of interest to those who work in disciplines related to practical theology for two reasons: First, Berger presses those concerned with Christian practices and their histories to attend to a wider range of source material than often has been the case. In particular, she helps us attend to the ways in which such things as the visual and musical arts, medical treatises, clothing, and architecture lead us to access a more truthful history of Christian liturgy. Second, she seeks to use this reconfigured history to open a much needed space for more “nuanced reflections in a world where gender differences continue to be alive and well in worship” (33).

Berger structures her book in three parts: a methodological framework, a set of four studies through which she demonstrates that method, and a concluding exploration of the implications

of this new liturgical historiography for the continuing work of liturgical reform. The first part is further divided into two chapters. One provides a concise overview of liturgical historiography and its problems and locates her work in this tradition and its development. The second introduces her methodological conversation with gender studies and sets out her methodological convictions: that gender is a “relational category and has to be displayed as such,” that gender applies “to all gendering processes and identities,” and that “‘gender’ is not a stable universal” (30–31).

Although Berger calls the four chapters that make up part two of the book “case studies,” they are more accurately described as topical studies that she launches from a particular event, narrative, object, or practice. Nevertheless, they are both interesting and informative. In the first of these, she explores the ways in which “gender processes...influence the intersections and relationship between spaces” (41), especially the intersection of public, ecclesial, and domestic spaces, and how gender shapes movement within such spaces. The second explores eucharistic practices, with attention to images of Jesus and Lady Wisdom as host and food, of the eucharist as mother’s milk, and of an ascetic virgin’s eucharistic presidency. Consistent with recent scholarship on eucharistic origins, Berger uncovers a richer and more diverse history and theology than has been evident in earlier theological discussions. In the third study Berger turns her attention to the ways in which “bodily flows” created (or were used to create) impediments to liturgical participation. Here she looks at the ways in which not only menstruation but also nocturnal emissions, sexual relations, and birth-giving all provided opportunity for discussions of ritual impurity at a time in which there was a growing sense of awe around eucharistic reception. She also examines the ways in which such discussions shaped, and were shaped by, gender identities and states (125–26). In her fourth study, she focuses on liturgical leadership, particularly the relationship between changing understandings of masculinity that were and are considered appropriate for liturgical presidency. Opening this chapter with an exploration of the acceptance of castrati in the Sistine Chapel choir, she then turns to consider the place of eunuchs in liturgical leadership and concludes with a discussion of the priestly role of Mary, the one who “first offered to the world the body of Christ” (148). It is in this chapter, with its attention to the “shifting codes of masculinity,” that Berger seems most successful in pressing the understanding of gender beyond “woman” and “man.” Perhaps this is only because previous historical work by Berger and others has made women’s identities and roles more visible—at least in liturgical history, whereas other gendered forms such as eunuchs have remained largely invisible.

Berger notes in her conclusion that “gendered realities are of principal importance for a history of liturgy because they display worship as a lived, embodied, corporal, and corporate practice” (161). As she so ably demonstrates throughout the book, “lifting the veil” on this history permits us to see that there is no ungendered history of Christian liturgy and its traditions; liturgical historiography either hides that history behind veils of power, privilege, and social constructions of normativity or it enables us to more fully see the human diversity that is the body of Christ, the church. As Berger also demonstrates, the unveiling of this history should make the church much

more circumspect in its claims that the church's tradition has always permitted or prohibited some particular form of gender-defined participation in its liturgical practices.

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