Divine Dialectics: Queer Temporality and the Body Politics of the Christian Right

Research Thesis

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Introduction

The January 6th insurrection and its aftermath have shed a light on both the fragile state of democracy and the disconcerting fusion of religious extremism and conservative politics in post-Trump America. In the time since the insurrection, the Christian Right has intensified its attack on Americans' bodily autonomy by targeting LGBTQIA+ rights and reproductive health care. Therefore, the present study is born of the precarious place in which millions of Americans find themselves. With the autonomy and personal freedoms of so many currently at risk, this study seeks to understand the mechanisms that drive America's current religiopolitical climate, specifically the ideological underpinnings of the Christian Right. It asks the fundamental questions: why is it happening and what is at stake? In pursuing this line of inquiry, the present study argues that the Christian Right's need to legislate bodies and bodily processes they deem inappropriate can be explained by fundamental ideas about gender that are supported by a selective reading of the faith.

The Christian Right is used here to refer to the nondenominational, informal network of individuals and organizations that share the desire for the integration of socially conservative and traditionalist policies. It is distinct from conservative Christianity and conservative politics in general in that it presupposes an active participation in political discourse with the specific goal of implementing policies that align with particular interpretations of the faith. Thus, this study utilizes the term as a way to communicate the broad scope of actors involved in the current legal landscape. In doing so, this study also acknowledges that the Christian Right is not monolithic, and that the following discussion may not apply to the group in its entirety.

Nevertheless, this study argues that a significant portion of the Christian Right views America as a Christian nation that should reflect traditional Christian values, which are explicitly cis- and heteronormative. Furthermore, the beliefs in complementarianism and biblical inerrancy further bolster the Christian Right's ideas about gender, as well as their selective reading of Christian history. In other words, certain aspects of the historical record are promoted, and others disregarded, which results in distorted or obscured views of the faith. These narratives promulgate the idea of a mythic Christian utopia, in which women have always been subservient to men; gender has always existed as a binary construct; transgender, intersex, and nonbinary people never existed; and homosexuals were dealt with severely and unilaterally.

This study addresses why it is happening and what is at stake by providing an overview of the current legislative climate. It discusses the types of anti-LGBTQIA+ bills, including curriculum bans, book bans, and gender-affirming care bans, as well as the types of bills that restrict abortion access. This study also addresses the dangers of the modern Christian Right, specifically its authoritarian political strategies and its connection to Christian nationalism. Finally, it addresses the doctrine of complementarianism and issues of biblical interpretation and mistranslations and how they impact the Christian Right's ideas about gender and sexuality.

This study directly challenges the Christian Right's narrow reading of history by rooting its analysis in the high Middle Ages. In doing so, it argues that the gender binary has never existed in Christian history. As a time of extensive intellectual and theological development, the period from around 1000 – 1300 best illustrates the dynamism of Christian theology. This study focuses on three major features of medieval Christianity in order to demonstrate the fluidity of gender: feminized and nonbinary depictions of Christ, trans role models in hagiography, and the autonomous women's community of the beguines. Furthermore, this study also surveys medieval

ideas about pregnancy and abortion in order to challenge the arguments made in *Dobbs v Jackson* (2022).

This historical analysis is significant to the present moment because America is at a crossroads. Make no mistake, the present dangers are not limited to transgender medical care or curriculum bans. Justice Clarence Thomas confirmed as much in his concurring opinion to *Dobbs v. Jackson*, in which he placed access to contraceptives and the rights to same-sex intimacy and marriage within the Supreme Court's crosshairs.[1] As of April 2023, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) was tracking 469 pieces of anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation currently circulating.[2] In 2021, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) tracked 733 hate groups across the nation, out of which there were sixty-five anti-LGBTQIA+, ninety-eight white nationalist, fifty-four neo-Nazi, and eighteen that were described as either Christian identity or radical traditional Catholicism.[3] In 2022, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) recorded its highest number of white supremacist propaganda incidents, which increased thirty-eight percent from 2021 and included the dissemination of racist, anti-LGBTQIA+, and antisemitic tropes.[4] The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) found that nearly one out of every five hate crimes are now motivated by anti-LGBTQIA+ bias, wherein transgender women of color are disproportionally represented in the data.[5] In the Trevor Project's 2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental

[1] Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, 573 U.S. 119 (2022).
[2] "Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in U.S. State Legislature," *American Civil Liberties Union* (blog), accessed January 26, 2023, https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights.
[3] "Hate Map," Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed March 11, 2023, https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map.
[4] "White Supremacist Propaganda Soars to All-Time High in 2022 | ADL," accessed March 11, 2023, https://www.adl.org/resources/report/white-supremacist-propaganda-soars-all-time-high-2022.
[5] "Fatal Violence Against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in 2022," Human Rights Campaign, accessed March 11, 2023, https://www.hrc.org/resources/fatal-violence-against-the-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-community-in-2022; "Human Rights Campaign: Tennessee Continues Obsession with Anti-LGBTQ+ Legislation with House Passage of Religious Refusal Bill and Second Anti-Drag Bill," Human Rights Campaign, March 7, 2023, https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/human-rights-campaign-tennessee-continues-obsession-with-anti-lgbtq-legislation-with-house-passage-of-religious-refusal-bill-and-second-anti-drag-bill.

Health, data showed that rates of suicidal ideation have seen an upward trend over the last three years, with forty-five percent of queer youth seriously considering attempting suicide and nearly one in five transgender and nonbinary youth actually attempting in 2022. On measures regarding current anti-transgender legislation, 83-93% of transgender and nonbinary youth reported being worried about the current trends. Conversely, however, queer youth who felt that their schools and communities were LGBTQIA+ affirming reported considerably less rates of suicide attempts.[6]

This project is an admittedly ambitious venture. Given the scope, this study does not claim to represent an exhaustive account, as certain aspects must necessarily yet regrettably be left out of the story. Rather, the purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of key trends of thought or action that can inform the understanding of religion and gender and demonstrate how they have remained irrevocably intertwined since time immemorial. For better or worse, history is a legitimating force. When historical distortions are presented as absolute truths and said "truths" are used to justify the oppression and control of queer and feminine bodies, it is critical to fact check and point out the inconsistencies. When the "truths" are disproved and the justifications are stripped away, what remains?

[6] "2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health," The Trevor Project, accessed March 11, 2023, https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2022/.

Chapter One: Foundations

Legislation

Curriculum and book bans, colloquially known as "Don't Say Gay or Trans" bills, are those that seek to remove any discussion of LGBTQIA+ people or issues from schools. Florida's H.B. 1557: Parental Rights in Education, which went into effect July 1, 2022, is perhaps the most representative of this type of bill. H.B. 1557 prohibits the "classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity" in kindergarten through third grade, or "in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate." It also bans school districts from adopting "procedures or student support forms" that would promise any sort of confidentiality between a student and school administrator on issues regarding the student's "mental, emotional, or physical health or well-being" Moreover, if a parent seeks legal action against the school, the school is responsible for all of the legal fees incurred.[1]

There are currently 206 anti-LGBTQIA+ curriculum bills in circulation, according to the ACLU.[2] In general, the bills are vague and just as broad as what is presented in H.B. 1557, which can have the effect of concealing the actual realities of what a passed bill would entail. As Jillian Lenson argues, bans of this type send the message to queer youth that their existence is so immoral that it cannot even be mentioned.[3] This wholesale erasure means that students of, or teachers with, LGBTQIA+ families cannot talk about their lives in schools. The ban on confidential student support systems means that schools could be legally required to reveal a student's gender identity to their parents, potentially exposing the child to harm if they live in an

[1] Parental Rights in Education, CS/CS/HB 1557, 2022-2024 Florida House of Representatives (2022).
[2] "Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in U.S. State Legislature."
[3] Jillian Lenson, "Litigation Primer Attacking State 'No Promo Homo' Laws: Why 'Don't Say Gay' Is Not O.K.," *National LGBT Bar Association Michael Greenberg Writing Competition* 24 (2015): 147.

unaccepting environment. In fact, according to the Trevor Project's 2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health, only thirty-two percent transgender and nonbinary youth reported having a gender-affirming home, and only thirty-seven percent of LGBTQIA+ youth reported having an LGBTQIA+ affirming home.[4] Additionally, forcing schools to cover the legal fees for aggrieved parents means putting even more of a financial strain on the already struggling public school system.

Another class of bills are those that impede access to gender-affirming care by banning and/or criminalizing care, blocking funding to medical centers that offer care, or blocking access to Medicaid or other health insurance for transgender people.[5] Gender-affirming care, according to the Christian Right, is child abuse, with some going so far as to characterize it as grooming or sexualizing children, specifically Marjorie Taylor Greene has recently said that anyone who supports access to gender-affirming care is a pedophile.[6] In reality, gender-affirming care is an umbrella term that can refer to a range of medical, social, and psychological interventions that are all done with the goal of affirming an individual's identified gender. This encompasses a broad spectrum of treatments that include, but are not limited to, counseling, hormone therapy, puberty blockers, speech therapy, hair removal, and surgical procedures. Those who seek out gender-affirming care often experience gender dysphoria, which has been shown to contribute to rates of bullying, violence, depression, and suicide.[7] Conversely, recent literature has shown that trans youth who had access to either hormone therapies or puberty blockers showed sixty percent

[4] "2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health."
[5] "Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in U.S. State Legislature."
[6] *Marjorie Taylor Greene: The 60 Minutes Interview*, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0Atpt8B3sY, 5:25-5:50.
[7] "What Is Gender-Affirming Care? Your Questions Answered," AAMC, accessed April 5, 2023, https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/what-gender-affirming-care-your-questions-answered.

lower odds of depression and seventy-three percent lower odds of suicidality,[8] a finding that is supported by past literature.[9] A study conducted on the relationship between access to puberty blockers and suicidality found that there was a significant inverse association between access to puberty blockers as an adolescent and lifetime suicidal ideation.[10] Therefore, it would seem that such bills that seek to deny access to gender-affirming care do not protect children, as lawmakers would suggest. Yet, as of April 2023, thirteen states have passed bans on care access while twenty more are currently considering bans.[11]

Florida's proposed H.B. 1421, for instance, bans "gender clinical interventions," for minors, which it defines broadly as "procedures or therapies that alter internal or external physical traits." The bill would also prohibit insurance companies from providing coverage for care, including for adults.[12] Kentucky's Senate Bill 150 combines curriculum and gender-affirming care into one comprehensive ban. Among other things, the bill allows school administrators to refuse to use a student's identified pronouns; bans any curriculum that looks at "gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation" at any grade level; denies trans youth from using restrooms that align with their identified gender; and criminalizes gender-affirming care.[13] S.B. 150 has been condemned as one of the worst anti-trans bills in the nation by the

[8] Diana M. Tordoff et al., "Mental Health Outcomes in Transgender and Nonbinary Youths Receiving Gender-Affirming Care," *JAMA Network Open* 5, no. 2 (February 1, 2022): e220978, https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.0978.
[9] Jack L. Turban et al., "Access to Gender-Affirming Hormones during Adolescence and Mental Health Outcomes among Transgender Adults," *PloS One* 17, no. 1 (2022): e0261039, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0261039.
[10] Jack L. Turban et al., "Pubertal Suppression for Transgender Youth and Risk of Suicidal Ideation," *Pediatrics* 145, no. 2 (February 2020): e20191725, https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-1725.
[11] "Attacks on Gender Affirming Care by State Map," Human Rights Campaign, accessed April 5, 2023, https://www.hrc.org/resources/attacks-on-gender-affirming-care-by-state-map. States who have passed bans: UT, AZ, TX, SD, IA, AR, WV, KY, TN, MS, AL, GA, FL. States who are considering bans: WA, OR, ID, MT, WY, ND, NE, KS, OK, HI, MO, WI, MI, IN, OH, VA, NC, SC, NJ, NH.
[12] Gender Clinical Interventions, CS/HB 1421, 2022-2024 Florida House of Representatives (2023).
[13] AN ACT relating to children, SB 150, 2023 Regular Session (2023).

HRC, the ACLU of Kentucky, and the Trevor Project.[14] The bill was vetoed by Governor Andy Beshear, but was overridden by both the Senate and the House.[15]

Anti-trans bills do not only impact trans youth, as drag performances have also come under fire, particularly as Tennessee became the first state to pass its ban. Tennessee H.B. 30 prohibits "adult cabaret entertainment" in public settings, which it defines as "entertainment erotic in nature, and featuring go-go dancers, exotic dancers, topless dancers, male or female impersonators, or similar entertainers."[16] This comes at the same time as hate groups like the Proud Boys protest drag story hours occur across the nation. Drag Story Hour (DSH) is a global, nonprofit organization that helps organize many of the local story hours where drag queens visit libraries, schools, and bookstores to read to children. According to the DSH website, the organization envisions "a world where kids can learn from LGBTQ+ stories and experiences to love themselves, celebrate the fabulous diversity of their communities, and stand up for what they believe in and each other."[17] Trans adults are also facing bathroom bans, as demonstrated Florida's proposed House Bill 1521, which would authorize cisgender individuals to ask

[14] "BREAKING: Human Rights Campaign Condemns the Kentucky House for Advancing Sweeping Anti-Trans Bill; Calls on Gov. Beshear to Veto," Human Rights Campaign, March 17, 2023, https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/breaking-human-rights-campaign-condemns-the-kentucky-house-for-advancing-sweeping-anti-trans-bill-calls-on-gov-beshear-to-veto; ACLU of Kentucky [@ACLUofKY], "BREAKING: The Senate Passes #SB150, a Don't Say Gay Bill That Ends All Gender-Affirming Care for Minors in Kentucky. SB 150 Is the Worst Anti-Trans Bill in the Nation. Trans & LGBTQ Kentuckians: Your Government Failed You Today, but We WILL Keep Fighting. You Belong Here. Https://T.Co/LyDYxIXaSH," Tweet, *Twitter*, March 16, 2023, https://twitter.com/ACLUofKY/status/1636495935709618176; "The Trevor Project Condemns Passage of Extreme Anti-Trans Bill by Kentucky Lawmakers, Urges Veto by Governor," *The Trevor Project* (blog), March 16, 2023, https://www.thetrevorproject.org/blog/the-trevor-project-condemns-passage-of-extreme-anti-trans-bill-by-kentucky-lawmakers-urges-veto-by-governor/.

[15] "SB 150: KY Legislature Easily Overrides Gov. Beshear's Veto of Gender-Affirming Care Ban Bill," Lexington Herald Leader, March 29, 2023, https://www.kentucky.com/news/politics-government/article273703635.html.

[16] House Bill 30, 113th General Assembly (2023).

[17] Drag Story Hour, "What Is Drag Story Hour?," Drag Story Hour, accessed April 5, 2023, https://www.dragstoryhour.org/about.

transgender people to leave the bathroom, and refusing to comply would be a second degree misdemeanor punishable by up to 60 days in jail.[18]

State governments are also taking aim at reproductive freedoms. Since the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v Wade* (1973), thirty-four states now have restrictions on abortion access, with Idaho, South Dakota, Oklahoma, Texas, Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, and West Virginia being listed as the most restrictive states by the Guttmacher Institute. In other words, only sixteen states currently protect access to abortion.[19] Moreover, the states which are the most restrictive allow for very few exceptions. Idaho, for instance, allows exceptions for instances of rape or incest *only* if the patient is in the first trimester (first thirteen weeks) *and* if the rape or incest was reported to law enforcement beforehand.[20] Additionally, House Republicans reportedly rejected language that would allow exceptions for life-threatening conditions because "the list was endless when we began considering the decisions that would fall under that language."[21] Tennessee's ban criminalizes abortion at any point, regardless of viability, as a Class E felony for patients and a Class C felony for physicians, carrying the risk of up to 6 and 15 years in prison, respectively.[22] While South Carolina's current policy bans abortions after twenty-two weeks, the proposed House Bill 3549 states its purpose as "acknowledging the sanctity of innocent human life, created in the image of God, which should be equally protected from fertilization to natural death." The bill considers

[18] Facility Requirements Based on Sex, HB 1521, 2023 Regular Session (2023).
[19] Guttmacher Institute, "Interactive Map: US Abortion Policies and Access After Roe," accessed April 5, 2023, https://states.guttmacher.org/policies/. Abortion is currently protected to some degree in WA, OR, CA, AK, HI, CO, NM, MN, IL, MD, NJ, NY, CT, MA, VT, ME.
[20] Amends existing law to revise the definition of "abortion" and to provide that certain actions and attempts shall not be considered criminal abortions, HS 374, 67th Legislature (2023).
[21] "As Doctors Flee State, Idaho Bill Expands Exceptions for Abortion. Health Isn't One of Them," Idaho Statesman, March 30, 2023, https://www.idahostatesman.com/news/politics-government/state-politics/article273748485.html.
[22] SB 2196, 113th Tennessee General Assembly (2023).

abortion as equal to homicide, even if what is terminated is nothing more than a fertilized egg, and there are no exceptions for rape or incest.[23]

The consequences of such aggressive bans are significant. With abortions now carrying felony offences in some states, doctors are either leaving en masse or are forced to watch their patients suffer. Tennessee, for instance, requires physicians to appear in court for an "affirmative defense" where they must defend that their choice to terminate was life-saving care. The defense does not prevent a felony charge, however, and Tennessee's law is so vague that it is impossible for physicians to know "how close to death or impairment" a patient must be to receive life-saving care. To put it a different way, a doctor that terminates a pregnancy to save the life of a patient commits a crime, but if they do not terminate and the patient dies, they commit malpractice. This is the reality that countless physicians are currently facing across the nation.[24] Moreover, the reasons pregnant people seek out abortions are legion. Yet, only thirty-eight percent live in a state that is supportive of abortion rights.[25] The outlook for reproductive healthcare is so dire that human rights organizations have called upon the United Nations to intervene through a letter that was signed by nearly 200 leading experts and organizations.[26]

[23] South Carolina Prenatal Equal Protection Act of 2023, HB 3549, 125th General Assembly (2023).
[24] Jamie McGee, Tennessee Lookout September 7, and 2022, "'Chilling Effect': Doctors Face New Legal Quandaries under Tennessee's Abortion Ban," *Tennessee Lookout* (blog), September 7, 2022, https://tennesseelookout.com/2022/09/07/chilling-effect-doctors-face-new-legal-quandaries-under-tennessees-abortion-ban/; "Why Doctors Are Decrying Tennessee's 'dangerous' Abortion Ban as Lawmakers Debate Change," The Tennessean, accessed April 5, 2023, https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/politics/2023/03/02/tennessee-abortion-ban-doctors-decry-law-as-changes-debated/69950913007/.
[25] "Abortion," Guttmacher Institute, March 23, 2023, https://www.guttmacher.org/united-states/abortion.
[26] Global Justice Center et al., "Re: Urgent Appeal: Human Rights Crisis Following the United States Supreme Court Decision in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Org.," March 2, 2023, https://www.globaljusticecenter.net/files/UNSpecialProceduresLetter_USAbortionRights.pdf.

The Christian Right

Many scholars have underscored the significance of the Christian Right's assault on bodily autonomy by drawing attention to its fascist political strategies. Because the term "fascism" itself is contentious, it is important to note that this study does not in any way claim that America is a fascist nation. However, it does argue for the contextualization of current events within a framework that considers how certain features of the present religiopolitical climate can and should be read as warning signs. Moreover, Christine Kray and Uli Linke note that the recognition of fascist politics or strategies does not presuppose the existence of a fascist regime, movement, or ideology. Instead, they argue for the study of the culture that supports fascist politics, what they call the "seeds of fascism," as they relate to racist nationalism, victimhood, authoritarianism, and militancy.[27]

Support for Christian nationalism is a defining feature of certain factions within the Christian Right. Republican Representatives Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert have perhaps been the most vocal of the current GOP, with Greene quoted as saying "We need to be the party of nationalism, and I'm a Christian and I say it proudly. We should be Christian nationalists."[28] Christian nationalism is the conviction that the United States is a fundamentally Christian nation. It denies secularism and instead seeks to promote the institutionalization of Christianity as the one true and governing religion.[29] Sociologists Jesse Smith and Gary J. Adler, Jr. argue that this particular type of Christianity is highly "racialized, identarian, and

[27] Christine A. Kray and Uli Linke, eds., *Race, Gender, and Political Culture in the Trump Era: The Fascist Allure* (London: Routledge, 2021), 10, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003034810.
[28] Next News Network, "Reporter @TaylerUSA and @RepMTG Sat down for an Exclusive Interview. They Talked about God, Child Drag Shows, January 6th, and the Lack of Courage in the GOP. Https://T.Co/1apZJOb2cB," Twitter Post, *Twitter*, July 24, 2022, https://twitter.com/NextNewsNetwork/status/1551204108471861248.
[29] Caroline Corbin, "The Supreme Court's Facilitation of White Christian Nationalism," *Ala. L. Rev.* 71 (January 1, 2020): 841–42.

exclusionary."[30] Following the logic that America is a Christian nation, supporters believe that only white Christians are "true" Americans. Moreover, Kristen Kobes Du Mez found that support of Christian nationalism serves as an indicator of a range of conservative views, particularly racial and religious intolerance, traditionalist gender ideology, support for excessive use of violence against Black Americans by law enforcement, and opposition to queer rights and gun control.[31]

Many of the facets of Christian nationalism align with what Robert Paxton refers to as "mobilizing passions," which he argues are the often overlooked conditions that help shape fascist actions. In sum, they are: a sense of crisis and victimhood, perceived group decline, the primacy of the in-group and their right to dominate out-groups, the need for exclusionary group purity, and the need for an authoritarian leader. These mobilizing passions are supported by the framework provided by Kray and Linke and are apparent in the rhetoric of Christian Right. Similarly, Umberto Eco's *Ur-Fascism* or "eternal fascism" is often cited among the literature as a means of quantifying Kray and Linke's "seeds of fascism." Eco delineates fourteen features: the cult of tradition; rejection of modernism; anti-intellectualism; rejection of analysis or criticism; fear of difference; appeals to the lower classes; nationalism; victimization; sense of being in a permanent war; disdain for the weak; desire for heroic deaths; condemnation of nonnormative sexualities; selective populism; and newspeak. Critically, Eco notes that only one feature needs to be present "to allow for fascism to coagulate around it."[32]

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[30] Jesse Smith and Gary J. Adler, "What *Isn't* Christian Nationalism? A Call for Conceptual and Empirical Splitting," *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 8 (January 2022): 2, https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231221124492.
[31] Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, First published as a Liveright paperback (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2021), 4.
[32] Umberto Eco, "Ur-Fascism," *The New York Review of Books*, no. June 22, 1995, accessed April 26, 2023, https://web.archive.org/web/20170131155837/http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/06/22/ur-fascism/.

In a joint report released by the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC) entitled *Christian Nationalism and the January 6th Insurrection*, many leading scholars of Christian nationalism also support Paxton's mobilizing passions and Eco's Ur-Fascism. Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, for instance, use survey data collected soon after the January 6th insurrection to demonstrate how indicators of Christian nationalist ideology were strongly correlated with the likelihood of denying Trump's culpability in the riots and of affirming the involvement of Black Lives Matter and Antifa in the violence. They also found that those who support Christian nationalism are more likely to subscribe to conspiratorial thinking and to embrace antisemitism and racist beliefs, endorse traditional gender roles, oppose LGBTQIA+ and transgender rights, distrust science and scientists, and "hold anti-democratic attitudes favoring restricting the vote and denying the existence of voter suppression."[33] Elsewhere in the report, Andrew Seidel gathers photographic evidence that shows how Christian iconography was abundant among the insurrectionists, including but not limited to the Christian flag, a large wooden cross allegedly erected by members of the Proud Boys, and an extensive array of flags and posters that fused Christian and "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) imagery.[34]

Beyond January 6th, these mobilizing passions can also be seen in the rhetoric and actions surrounding the current legal landscape. Drag story hours in particular have become a favored target of alt-right extremists; the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), in partnership with the ADL, have recorded 166 incidents of drag events being protested since early 2022. Additionally, they found that in 2023, anti-drag protests have included members of white

[33] Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and Freedom From Religion Foundation, "Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021 Insurrection," February 9, 2022, 1–3, https://bjconline.org/jan6report/.
[34] Ibid., 26–35.

supremacist groups, religious extremists, and the Proud Boys.[35] At a recent protest of a drag story hour in Wadsworth, Ohio, a number of Neo-Nazi extremist groups were in attendance, including the Proud Boys, Patriot Front, White Lives Matter, and the Blood Tribe. Protestors shouted multiple slurs at those attending the event and called the drag performers "groomers" and chanted that "pedophiles get the rope." Footage from the event again demonstrates the fusion of extremist and Christian imagery, with the Christian and Nazi flags flying together on the same side.[36] In essence, events like January 6th and anti-drag protests represent microcosms of the nation as a whole, where conservative politicians, Christian nationalists, and fascist Neo-Nazis are all batting for the same team.

At the core of the current attacks on queer and reproductive rights is the construct of gender. James Burns et al. examine the current trends of authoritarianism throughout the US, Europe, and Latin America. Focusing on the far-right's attacks on gender studies, they argue that such attacks are "part of a broader assault on the rights of women and LGBTQ people, the academy, and democracy."[37] They also characterize the attacks as a "manufactured moral panic," which they argue is a core tenet of fascism. Moreover, they assert that "the propagandized fears of 'gender ideology,' 'gender indoctrination,' and 'genderism' reflect a historic biopolitical obsession with policing gender and sexual practices, institutionalizing heteropatriarchal gender

[35] "UPDATED Report: Drag Events Faced More than 160 Protests and Significant Threats Since Early 2022," GLAAD, March 31, 2023, https://www.glaad.org/blog/anti-drag-report.
[36] Will Carless and Doug Livingston, "Nazi Salutes, Pepper Spray and Pistols: Ohio Drag Event Devolves into an Extremist Melee," USA TODAY, accessed April 26, 2023, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/03/14/drag-storyelling-in-wadsworth-ohio-devolves-into-extremist-fight/11465959002/; *Neo-Nazis, White Lives Matter and Proud Boys Protest Drag Story Hour Event in Wadsworth Ohio*, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moxzSxwwmio.
[37] James P. Burns, Colin D. Green, and Jaime Nolan, "Authoritarian Populism, Body Politics, and the Assault on Gender Studies: Toward a New Progressivism in Education and Society," in *Populism and Educational Leadership, Administration and Policy: International Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2022), 33, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003099482.

and sexual norms, and disidentifying as citizens anyone who fails to embody those norms."[38] Burns et al. further explain that this manufactured sense of anxiety surrounding gender and sexuality rationalize the legislating of bodies considered to be deviant and that religious rhetoric that positions queerness and women's reproductive rights as being in opposition to God's will further bolsters autocratic propaganda.[39]

Although religious extremism is not a new development, Caroline Corbin argues that this modern iteration stems from white, conservative evangelicalism and the rise of the Christian Right.[40] Du Mez's scholarship supports this argument, as she reasons that conservative evangelicalism in particular has become an incredibly divisive force in American culture and politics, due in large part to its diffusion beyond church walls. Through the creation and consumption of a distinctly evangelical consumer culture over the last half century, the designation of evangelical no longer requires church attendance or theological familiarity. By so thoroughly crafting such an extensive consumer culture, Du Mez argues that evangelicals have been able to consolidate and establish their power by "offering certainty in times of social change, promising security in the face of global threats and...affirming the righteousness of a white Christian America."[41] She also argues that cultural evangelicalism serves as a critical mechanism of identity formation, one which promotes what they define as traditional Christian values, all the while situating them in a culture of fear. Since the 1940s, evangelicals have been steadily cultivating a muscular, militarized form of Christianity which serves as the defender of faith, country, white patriarchy, and traditional gender roles. In other words, "generations of evangelicals learned to be afraid of communists, feminists, liberals, secular humans, 'the

[38] Ibid., 33–34.
[39] Ibid., 38–40.
[40] Corbin, "The Supreme Court's Facilitation of White Christian Nationalism," 845.
[41] Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 4–9.

homosexuals,' the United Nations, the government, Muslims, immigrants."[42] This type of fear mongering is apparent in right-wing media, particularly Fox News, where commentators like Tucker Carlson pander to culture-war paranoia.

While the current brand of Christian extremism has a definitively Protestant flair, the same cannot be said for its antecedent. The Christian Front was a fascist paramilitary group whose plot to overthrow the government in 1940 was nearly executed. The group was predominantly Catholic and was formed under the leadership of popular radio priest, Father Charles Coughlin. Amid the Great Depression and the start of WWII, tensions were rising in America and Father Coughlin's fiercely antisemitic, anticommunist, "us vs them" rhetoric found a welcome home in the divided political climate. Thus, the Christian Front was Coughlin's solution to the "purple poison of Bolshevism and its doctrines."[43] In Gene Fein's survey of the Christian Front, he describes them as reveling in their "delusion that they were leading a crusade to retake America for Christians." Almost immediately, pro-fascist, pro-Nazi, and ultra-nationalist groups aligned themselves with the Christian Front. Antisemitism was a core component of the Front's doctrine, inherited from Coughlin's inflammatory sermons, and Jewish-Americans were figured as the "other" responsible for Christian's victimization and perceived group decline.[44] When their plot to overthrow the government was uncovered by the

[42] Ibid., 11–13.
[43] Marshall W. Fishwick, "Father Coughlin Time: The Radio And Redemption," *Journal of Popular Culture* 22, no. 2 (Fall 1988): 38.
[44] Gene Fein, "Twisted Social Justice: Father Coughlin & the Christian Front," *Forum on Public Policy: A Journal of the Oxford Round Table*, March 22, 2009, 7–15, https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&issn=1556763X&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA216682614&sid=googleScholar&linkaccess=abs.

FBI, they were charged with sedition and conspiracy to overthrow the US government[45], but were later acquitted.[46]

This context is significant because it demonstrates that the attraction of fascism and authoritarianism is nondenominational. Indeed, the present study is not as much concerned with any one denomination in particular as it is with bad faith actors who use religion to deflect from ulterior motives. While the fascist political strategies apparent among certain factions of the Christian Right are the primary concern of the present study, it is equally important to examine the connection between religious extremism and mainline Christianity. Christian nationalism is of course distinct from Christianity in general, and the two should not be treated as one in the same. Nevertheless, they are connected, a point demonstrated by Sophie Bjork-James through her discussion on how sexuality acts as a unifying factor between the two. She explains that in the Christian Right, "American" and "Christian" concerns are conflated, and anything that deviates away from the cisgender, heterosexual norm is perceived as a threat to the nation. This sentiment was demonstrated recently in the Tennessee House of Representatives by Representative Gino Bulso who proposed legislation to codify the definition of "sex" as immutable and "determined by anatomy and genetics existing at the time of birth."[47] After pushback against such a narrow definition, Rep. Bulso argued that his bill promoted the

[45] "UPROAR AS 'FRONT' MEN PLEAD: Christian Front Officers Quell Protests on Bail Terms 17 Indicted Say Not Guilty to Sedition Charge," *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, February 8, 1940.
[46] "Nine Acquitted of Plot Against U. S. Government," *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, June 25, 1940; "Nine Acquitted of Sedition Plot; Mistrial Is Declared in Four Cases: 9 ARE ACQUITTED IN SEDITION TRIAL Sergeant Buckley Goes Free Kennedy Withholds Comment Forewoman Gives Verdicts 24 Ballots for Each Defendant," 1940; "Christian Fronters Freed; Jury Fails to Agree on 5: Nine Jurymen Favored Complete Acquittal for All from Very Beginning; William Bishop, Alleged Leader, Still Held Others Released," *Jewish Advocate (1909-1990)*, June 28, 1940. For more information on Father Coughlin and the Christian Front, the FBI has declassified its 863 page report. See "Charles Coughlin Part 01 of 02" and "Charles Coughlin Part 02 of 02," at https://vault.fbi.gov/charles-coughlin/charles-coughlin-part-01-of-02 and https://vault.fbi.gov/charles-coughlin/charles-coughlin-part-02-of-02.
[47] HB 0239, 113th Tennessee General Assembly (2013).

importance of (heteronormative) marriage and the family, which he believes to be the "remedy to most of what ails our society," and that "attempts by others to undermine the family through legislation and otherwise is frankly what is at the root of this plague of violence that is across our entire nation right now."[48] From this statement alone it is clear that Rep. Bulso sees the perceived decline of society as caused by non-cisgender and non-heteronormative bodies. Bjork-James' argument is supported by psychologists Wilkins et al. who conducted a qualitative analysis on Christian's perceived intergroup conflict that arises in response to LGBTQIA+ progress. They describe this sense of conflict as zero-sum beliefs, where a gain for the out-group is viewed as a loss for the in-group, and the perceived resource stress is taken as a threat to the in-group's social dominance. They also use the symbolic threat approach to explain that when there are conflicting values and beliefs between the groups, the out-group's gains can also be seen as a moral violation against the in-group, which prompts prejudice and bias.[49]

To illustrate, consider the issue of same-sex marriage. *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) meant same-sex couples gained the right to marry. From a conservative Christian standpoint, the legalization of same-sex marriage was seen as a direct attack on traditional Christian morality, and a society that supports it means a society in which Christians have lost a bit of their dominance and influence. The cognitive dissonance between viewing America as a Christian nation yet perceiving a decline in the nation's Christian values prompts them to seek rectification. Thus, the attacks on queer and feminine bodily autonomy, the rhetorical "culture wars" and the fearmongering about the "woke left" are all manifestations of this dissonance.

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[48] *House Floor Session- 27th Legislative Day- April 21, 2023*, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0F83H_qfBg, (2:57:44-3:10:41).
[49] Clara L. Wilkins et al., "Is LGBT Progress Seen as an Attack on Christians?: Examining Christian/Sexual Orientation Zero-Sum Beliefs.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 122, no. 1 (January 2022): 74, https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000363.

The final component to consider is the doctrine of complementarianism, which helps support the Christian Right's views on gender and sexuality. Complementarianism refers to the theological view that men's divine purpose is to lead with authority, while women's is to follow in submission.[50] Beth Allison Barr provides the most comprehensive examination of complementarianism, specifically within the evangelical context. She argues that the doctrine can also be read as divinely ordained patriarchy and because evangelicals believe that the Bible is completely without error, to question the patriarchy is to question God.[51] Barr's thesis is supported by Du Mez, who provides that by creating a scriptural defense of patriarchy, evangelicals cemented gender into the core of their identity.[52] Mary Case demonstrates how the doctrine was then adopted by the Vatican and incorporated into Catholicism. For the Vatican, complementarianism means that "'man and woman' have 'equal dignity as persons' but that this equal dignity is premised on and manifest in essential and complementary differences, 'physical, psychological, and ontological.'"[53] Therefore, by theologically enshrining complementarity, the Christian Right has codified not only patriarchy but the gender binary itself.

Gender in the Middle Ages

Medieval constructions of gender were mutable and contradictory. In order to best contextualize the following study, three key components are identified as critical to the construction of medieval gender: the Fall, Aristotle, and the Gregorian Reform. While the story

[50] Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2021), 5.
[51] Ibid., 188.
[52] Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 166–67.
[53] Mary Anne Case, "The Role of the Popes in the Invention of Complementarity and the Vatican's Anathematization of Gender," *Religion & Gender* 6, no. 2 (July 2016): 156, https://doi.org/10.18352/rg.10124.

is of course much more complicated, this study argues that these three factors had the most impact on ideas about the differences between men and women.

Broadly speaking, the general consensus among the religious and secular populations was that women were inferior and that their subjugation to men was not only natural, but divinely ordained. The principal source for this notion was Genesis, specifically the Fall. The standard reading told of how Eve tempted Adam to eat the forbidden fruit and for her disobedience they were banished from the Garden of Eden forever. Thus, Eve came to be understood as the source of all evil and sin; women, who were the daughters of Eve, became guilty by association. Moreover, God's pronouncement that "thou shalt be under thy husband's power, and he shall have dominion over thee"[54] was (and continues to be) read as divine sanction of women's secondary status. Through their writings, the Church Fathers helped to solidify these notions into the collective conscience, particularly Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430) whose writings on women's sexuality were readily accepted by the Church.[55] Augustine asserted that Eve's original sin created sexual desire and that the lust inspired by women pushed men away from spiritual perfection and toward eternal damnation. Joan Gregg has argued that "it was intolerable to the male psyche that his own concupiscence should condemn him. Culpability, therefore, had to be placed elsewhere."[56] Furthermore, these ideas were filtered down to the laity through homiletic narratives which helped to strengthen the association between women and their demonic influence. Through her survey of medieval exempla, Gregg argues that while theologically, men had the free will to resist sexual temptation, the rhetoric of both the Church Fathers and the

[54] Gen. 3:16 (Vulgate).
[55] Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 4th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 24–26.
[56] Joan Young Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews: Reflections of the Other in Medieval Sermon Stories*, SUNY Series in Medieval Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 92.

exemplum configured women as the active, demonic aggressors and men as the passive, innocent victims.[57]

The second factor which greatly contributed to medieval ideas about gender was the work of Aristotle (384 – 322 BCE). In her pioneering study, *The Concept of Woman*, Sister Prudence Allen provides an in depth analysis of Aristotle's theory of sex polarity which would become thoroughly integrated into Christian theology.[58] For the purposes of this study, Aristotle's ideas about generation are the most important aspect of his various works. In essence, he argued for the "one-sex model" in which men were the perfect form and women were deformed versions of men. In all things, men and women were diametrically opposed: men represented the active, rational, soul while women were the passive, emotional, body. Thus, in matters of generation, men contributed the sensitive soul and women the material body. Moreover, because nature always aimed at perfection, a woman was the result of imperfect conditions during conception or pregnancy.[59] The Scholastic movement of the twelfth century synthesized the hitherto unknown Aristotelian corpus with the writings of the Church Fathers, which only strengthened the conviction of women's inferiority.[60] Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) was instrumental in this mission, as Sr. Allen argues that he developed an entirely new Christian philosophy that was built upon an Aristotelian foundation, and which solidified sex polarity. She continues that "his theological claim that sex polarity was entirely consistent with Christian religious teaching made sex polarity invulnerable to criticism within the Christian world for centuries to come."[61] Gary Macy charts the theological and canonical positions that were born of the Aristotelian revolution,

[57] Ibid., 92–93.
[58] Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 83–126.
[59] Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, 1990), 28–30; Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 27.
[60] Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 29.
[61] Allen, *The Concept of Woman*, 251.

where he argues that "the reception of Aristotle's concept of women by medieval scholars was a conscious work of selection." Not all aspects of his corpus meshed easily with Christian theology, such as his belief in the eternality of the world, but his writings on women found a welcome home. Writes Macy, "Theologians could have also rejected his teaching on the natural inferiority of women. That they did not was a choice."[62]

The final factor critical to the survey of medieval gender is the Gregorian Reform. Its central argument was for the supremacy of the priesthood and papacy over secular leaders. Thus, clerical celibacy was instituted as a way of distinguishing clergy from the laity. Macy argues that one of the methods used by reformers in their goal of enforcing celibacy was their denigration of women by portraying them as unclean and impure.[63] The rediscovery of Aristotle made the job all the more easier since the "theoretical intellectual and moral inferiority of women," was firmly reestablished.[64] Menstruation in particular was a pressing concern for medieval scholars; in his commentary on Gratian's *Decretum*, for example, Paucapalea described women's menstruation as a corrosive and putrefying force.[65] Dyan Elliot corroborates Macy's argument, as she explains how women were perceived as both "self-contaminating...and as a source of contagion to others."[66] Elliot also places the establishment of clerical celibacy within the larger context of the Church's objective to clearly define the male/female binary.[67] Jo Ann McNamara describes the shifting attitudes of the Gregorian Reform as the *Herrenfrage* that preceded the *Frauenfrage*.

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[62] Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 121.
[63] Ibid., 112–13.
[64] Jo Ann McNamara, "The Herrenfrage: The Reconstructing of the Gender System, 1050-1150," in *Medieval Masculinities*, ed. Jo Ann McNamara, Clare A. Lees, and Thelma Fenster, NED-New edition, vol. 7, Regarding Men in the Middle Ages (University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 5, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttv7fd.6.
[65] Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West*, 114.
[66] Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 2.
[67] Ibid., 82.

Rather than reinforcing the gender binary, she explains, the elevation of clerical celibacy actually destabilized it for a time, as men's withdrawal from women in turn gave women more freedom from male governance. Sensing that something resembling gender equality was on the horizon, however, men reaffirmed Eve's secondary creation, which "anchored women to the animal functions of sex and reproduction."[68]

Queer Medieval Theory

Once derogatory, the term queer has, through the process of reclamation, come to represent what Eve Sedgwick describes as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically."[69] Even before its formal introduction to academia in the 1990s,[70] historians have engaged in the ongoing debate of how to accurately and ethically locate queer experiences in the past. At its core, queer theory does not seek to impose any certain identity on historical figures, but rather it provides a framework for challenging conventional readings or assumed truths about the past in order to reveal new meaning.[71]

The discourse surrounding essentialism versus constructionism is a constant and ongoing debate among scholars of sexuality. Broadly summarized, it is the polarization around the relationship between what is constant and what is constructed. Specifically, the essentialist position holds that certain characteristics of humanity, such as gender or sexuality, are what Diana Fuss describes as "true essence," in that they are "irreducible, unchanging, and therefore

[68] McNamara, "The Herrenfrage: The Reconstructing of the Gender System, 1050-1150," 14–20.
[69] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 8.
[70] Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 5.
[71] Karl Whittington, "Queer," *Studies in Iconography* 33 (2012): 157–58; George Ritzer, *Sociological Theory*, 9th ed (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2014), 648–50.

constitutive of a given person or thing."[72] Constructionism, by contrast, argues that the things by which essentialists call essence are themselves socially and historically constructed. Rather than studying the 'given' objects themselves, constructionism seeks to understand the processes by which they are produced. In other words, "the essentialist holds that the natural is *repressed* by the social, [and] the constructionist maintains that the natural is *produced* by the social."[73]

Michael Foucault's work, and the readings of which that followed, have been foundational to the development of the constructionist position. In essence, the argument is that the categories of homosexual, heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, even sexuality itself, are inventions of the nineteenth century. These terms carry with them implications of identity formation and social experiences that are particular to modernity, therefore their retroactive application would constitute a degree of anachronism. The phrase "sex before sexuality" has become a way for constructionists to recognize these implications in their studies of medieval sexuality.[74] Foucault's position in particular can be characterized by the dichotomy he creates between acts and identities in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* where he writes "As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage...The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species."[75] While Foucault's work has come to define the field of medieval sexuality studies, he was not a medieval historian and only dealt with the medieval era

[72] Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 2.
[73] Ibid., 2–3.
[74] Kim M. Phillips and Barry Reay, *Sex Before Sexuality: A Premodern History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 12–13.
[75] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 1st American ed (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 43.

in passing. In fact, some scholars have taken issue with his readings of the Middle Ages being privileged over those of medievalists.[76]

John Boswell's work *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* is perhaps the most frequently cited in charges of essentialism. Boswell's main argument was that same-sex relationships were accepted and tolerated in Western Europe prior to the thirteenth century and that "neither Christian society nor Christian theology as a whole...supported any particular hostility to homosexuality, but both reflected and in the end retained positions adopted by some governments and theologians that could be used to derogate homosexual acts."[77] Moreover, he refuted the idea that Christian beliefs have been the cause of intolerance towards queer people.[78]

There exists within the field of medieval sexuality studies an ostensible divide between scholars who praise Boswell's work for the visibility it gave to the premodern same-sex experiences and those who condemn it as a work of anachronistic apologetics. Warren Johansson and William Percy, for instance, charge that Boswell took advantage of the lack of sources for the period prior to the thirteenth century,[79] while Francesca Sautman and Pamela Sheingorn argue that scholars' focus on its shortcomings detract from the challenge Boswell's work posed to the way historians think about the history of sexuality.[80] While there may be some merit certain charges of anachronism, it is helpful to acknowledge that when Boswell's study was published in 1980, he was the first medievalist to establish "medieval sexuality as a legitimate

[76] Quint Forgey and Josh Gerstein, "Justice Thomas: SCOTUS 'Should Reconsider' Contraception, Same-Sex Marriage Rulings," POLITICO, 6, accessed June 28, 2022, https://www.politico.com/news/2022/06/24/thomas-constitutional-rights-00042256.
[77] John Boswell, "Towards The Long View: Revolutions, Universals and Sexual Categories," *Salmagundi*, no. 58/59 (1982): 333.
[78] John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 6.
[79] William Johansson and William Percy, "Homosexuality," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities 1696 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 155.
[80] Forgey and Gerstein, "Justice Thomas," 6.

area of scholarly study," as Karma Lochrie as argued.[81] Considering that queer theory did not fully emerge as an academic discipline until the 1990s,[82] and that Boswell himself was "energized by a 1970s post-Stonewall enthusiasm,"[83] it would seem more grace is deserved for such a landmark study.

Thus, somewhere between the two camps exists a middle ground for many medievalists who find neither essentialism nor constructionism entirely satisfactory. Lochrie, for instance, has contended with the Foucauldian perspective and the "cluster of truths about pre-modern sexualities" it has produced. She argues that Foucault's inadequate reading of "the Christian Middle Ages...functions as the historical 'other' in Foucault's history of sexuality, as that time when discourse about sexuality was 'markedly unitary'" to use his words.[84] As such, medievalists existing in this methodological grey area have questioned the applicability of a strictly constructionist perspective. Boswell contended that if categories like homosexual and heterosexual are modern inventions rather than natural aspects of the human condition, and that if they only begin to exist "when and where people are persuaded to believe in it," then there is no gay history.[85] Similarly, Sautman and Sheingorn have argued that while scholars are stuck on the issue of identity, they miss out on the abundance of "resistant or dissident" sexual expressions revealed by the historical record. Kim Phillips and Barry Reay provide a more neutral approach, arguing that while historical evidence shows that people indeed demonstrated sexual preference, they did not operate within the bounds of modern sexual orientations and that

[81] Karma Lochrie, "Configurations of Gender and Sexuality in Medieval Europe," in *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*, ed. E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 89, https://doi.org/10.1017/CHO9781139547376.007.
[82] Whittington, "Queer," 157.
[83] Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West*, 202.
[84] Karma Lochrie, "Desiring Foucault," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27, no. 1 (1997): 3–9.
[85] Boswell, "IV," 93.

those labels should not be forced upon them retrospectively.[86] In truth, much of the methodological challenges stem from the lack of suitable vocabulary available to describe seemingly queer experiences in the past without the risk of anachronism.

Queer or trans temporality is another middle ground approach that envisions a non-normative history that enables "community formation, often through 'touches' or 'binds' that connect marginalized peoples across time" and allows for the "speculation about what might have happened, strategic anachronisms, and even defiance against the 'tyranny of historicism.'"[87] Similarly, Leah DeVun and Zeb Tortorici offer what they call *trans*historicities* as a methodological framework for critically engaging with queer and trans history. As they define it, *trans** signals "the overlapping, sometimes contradictory, modes of embodiment and representation that the term has come to signify" while *historicities* "rejects the imposition of any single narrative of events that would demand coherence or continuity, and...it refocuses us on the pleasures...that arise when we...are caught up in history." Together, trans*historicities privileges an interdisciplinary approach that allows for new ways of thinking about and engaging with past experiences.[88]

Applying queer theory to the Middle Ages serves two important functions: first, it problematizes the categories of sexuality, gender, and identity. Second, it interrogates sources through *queering* which destabilizes traditional, heteronormative readings of history.[89] Lochrie provides that "queering does not seek to discover or install lesbian and gay identities in premodern subjects or histories; rather it risks the anachronism of speaking of sexuality in the

[86] Phillips and Reay, *Sex Before Sexuality: A Premodern History*, 13.
[87] Leah DeVun and Zeb Tortorici, "Trans, Time, and History," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (November 1, 2018): 520, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7090003.
[88] Ibid., 534–35.
[89] Ritzer, *Sociological Theory*, 649–50.

first place to unsettle the heterosexual paradigms of scholarship."[90] Elsewhere, Lochrie argues that medievalists and other scholars' are self-limiting when they default to heteronormativity when investigating past sexualities. This trend among the literature is apparent, and seemingly contradictory to the Foucauldian/constructionist argument that the categories of homosexual and heterosexual did not exist until the nineteenth century. Lochrie further supports her argument that heteronormative readings of the Middle Ages are insufficient by noting that the concept of 'normal' itself did not exist. Rather, there was the concept of 'natural', which never implied normalcy but rather what was ideal. Moreover, theologians' concept of nature centered on the Fall, where prelapsarian nature was a state of perfection and postlapsarian nature resulted in the corruption of that perfection.[91] Heteronormative readings are thus insufficient indeed.

In light of such epistemological quandaries, then, the present study opts for the use of general terms where applicable, such as queer, trans, and gender non-conforming. Queer refers to individuals who do not explicitly adhere to social or gender norms, such as gender expression or sexuality.[92] Similarly, trans is used where applicable to express "genderqueer, genderfluid,[93] and non-binary identities, and is also used as a rubric for discussing ways of being that disrupt normative notions of binary gender/sex."[94] Gender non-conformity refers to expressions of gender that do not align with the norms determined by a particular culture or era.[95] It does not

[90] Karma Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Peggy McCracken and James A Schultz (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 180, http://site.ebrary.com/id/10159617.
[91] Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
[92] Gutt and Spencer-Hall, *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, 311; When queer is used to discuss people today, it is generally understood to mean anyone who is not heterosexual or cisgender, i.e., the entire LGBTQIA+ community.
[93] Ibid., 298-99; According to Spencer-Hall and Gutt, genderqueer refers to the inadequacy of a person's assigned gender to encompass their gender identity, while genderfluid refers to an individual whose identified gender fluctuates.
[94] Gutt and Spencer-Hall, *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, 11.
[95] Ibid., 299.

require that individuals reject their assigned gender, only that their performance of gender runs contrary to what is contemporarily considered to be typical of their assigned gender. In employing this language, this study does not definitively claim that the individuals discussed hereafter identified as such, or that they had the sense of a queer identity. These things are ultimately impossible to know for certain, and this study does not attempt otherwise. That being said, the advantage of using terms like queer or trans is that they provide a recognizable analytical framework that allows one to speculate about past experiences without naming them directly.

Conclusion

Having now laid the foundations for the following survey, this study contributes to the existing body of literature by conducting a critical examination of the tensions and contradictions between historical and contemporary beliefs and practices regarding gender within Christianity. The impetus for this investigation is demonstrated by the political actions of the Christian Right and the rise in religious and political extremism. Given that the core of the justification for the Christian Right's attacks on bodily autonomy is the promotion of "traditional Christian values," which can be understood to mean the promotion of cisgender, heterosexual values, this study consults the theological and intellectual developments of the high Middle Ages in order to critically examine the stability of said values. This dialectic inquiry in informed by queer and trans theories and the existing body of medieval scholarship that utilizes such approaches. Thus, the purpose of the following survey is to provide a more nuanced understanding of the theological complexities of Christianity in order to demonstrate how divine embodiment has historically challenged binary understandings of gender.

Chapter Two: Biblical Exegesis and Hermeneutics

On June 4, 2022, Dillion Awes of Stedfast Baptist church in Watauga, Texas gave sermon titled "Why We Won't Shut Up" which went viral on the internet and sparked outrage over its incendiary language regarding the LGBTQIA+ community. Awes made it clear at several points throughout the sermon that he believed that all homosexual people are pedophiles, after which he pronounced:

> What does God say is the answer for the sodomite? What does God say is the answer, is the solution, to the homosexual in 2022, here in the New Testament, here in the book of Romans? That they are worthy of death. These people should be put to death. Every single homosexual in our country should be charged with the crime, the abomination of homosexuality that they have, they should be convicted in a lawful trial, they should be sentenced with death, they should be lined up against a wall, and shot in the back of the head. That's what God teaches. That's what the Bible says.[1]

Awes' sermon demonstrates the significance of this entire enterprise, but especially the need to critically examine how modern interpretations and applications of the Bible have had a direct impact on the current religiopolitical climate. Awes' condemnation of all homosexual people as pedophiles is not unique to Stedfast, as such rhetoric is found throughout factions of the Christian Right. It is precisely this rhetoric, purportedly justified by the Scriptures, that is used to rationalize the oppression of those who do not conform to the "godly" standards that are forced upon them.

Biblical inerrancy, the belief that the Bible is completely without error and that it should be taken as literal, historical, and scientific fact, is a critical component to the following discussion. For fundamentalist evangelicals in particular[2], an individual's "plain and literal"

[1] *Why We Won't Shut Up* (Watauga, Texas, 2022), https://tinyurl.com/7cee6hpm. 0:44:30-0:45:09.
[2] The distinction of fundamentalist evangelicals is due to the "fundamentalist-modernist controversy." In sum, modernist Protestants wanted to allow the faith to evolve with the changing times, while fundamentalists insisted

reading is all that is needed to parse out the nuances of the Scriptures.[3] The Bible is a historical document that was written in a time wholly different from the present, and plain and literal readings ignore critical historical context. Moreover, a standard English Bible has been translated from a translation from a translation and so on. Words like homosexual, for instance, did not exist when the Bible was written, yet it appears in modern translations. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to critically examine key passages germane to the study of gender and sexuality, and to provide some much needed scholarly and historical context.

Women

As with the medieval period, Genesis is the starting point for modern ideas about gender. For evangelicals in particular, Barr explains that God's words to Eve in Genesis 3:16, "in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children, and thou shalt be under thy husband's power, and he shall have dominion over thee,"[4] is understood as the divine sanction for the gender hierarchy. Women's secondary creation reaffirms this, and together means that God's design for women was to submit to male authority.[5] Going hand in hand with Genesis are the Pauline epistles, which further support evangelical beliefs about women. Key passages include 1 Corinthians 14:34, which tells women to be silent in church; 1 Timothy 2:11-14, which prohibits women to teach or hold authority over men, only to be "silent with all subjugation;" 1 Corinthians 11, which argues that women were created for men; and the sets of instructions known as the "household codes."[6] According to Barr, modern evangelical teachings claim that Paul's writings were uniformly

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that orthodox doctrine was timeless. See Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 187–89; Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 18–19.

[3] Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 187–89; Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 18–19.

[4] Vulgate.

[5] Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 28–32.

[6] Eph. 5:21-6:9; Col. 3:18-4:1; 1 Pet. 2:18-3:7; Titus 2:1-10.

applied throughout Christian history, which is why they are used to support the ideological foundations of complementarianism today. In other words, plain and literal interpretation means that "evangelicals read Pauline texts as designating permanent and divinely ordained role distinctions between the sexes."[7]

This plain reading of Paul removes it from its historical context. To be sure, it is difficult to interpret Ephesians 5:22, "Let women be subject to their husbands," as anything else when taken at face value. However, when the passage is considered in the context of first-century Rome in which it was written, it takes on new meanings. Barr explains that Paul was writing at a time when the paterfamilias had complete authority over the women, children, and slaves in the household and women were legally required to submit to their husbands. Similar non-Christian moral codes of the time generally only dictated how the members of the household should behave towards the men and emphasized the inequality of the sexes. Paul's codes diverge from this tradition, as he addresses each member of the home. Consider Ephesians 5:21-25, "Being subject one to another, in the fear of Christ. Let women be subjects to their husbands, as to the Lord...Husbands, love your wives, as Christ also loved the church and delivered himself up for it."[8] Colossians 3:18 begins similarly, by addressing the wives, then the husbands, and continues on to address the children and servants. Thus, by not only addressing all members of the household, but also addressing the wives before the husbands, Barr argues that the household codes can be read as a call to resist the strict patriarchy of the Roman Empire.[9]

[7] Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 40.
[8] Vulgate.
[9] Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 47–50.

Homosexuality

Christian condemnation of homosexuality generally revolves around the same handful of texts: Genesis 19:1-11, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:10, and Romans 1:26-27. To be sure, the issue of whether or not homosexuality is explicitly discussed in the Bible is a hotly debated topic, one in which critical questions of interpretation and translation arise. Take, for instance, the appearance of the term "homosexual" itself. One of the most commonly cited sources in this discussion is Paul's vice list in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, which, according to the Vulgate Latin translation, reads: "Know you not that the unjust shall not possess the kingdom of God? Do not err: Neither fornicators no idolators nor adulterers: Nor the effeminate nor liers with mankind nor thieves nor covetous nor drunkards nor railers nor extortioners shall possess the kingdom of God." The terms "effeminate" and "liers with mankind" (Latin: *molles* and *masculorum concubitores*) appear variously in modern Bibles as "men who have sex with men,"[10] "men who practice homosexuality,"[11] or simply "homosexuals."[12] Theological scholars, like Christina Richie, argue that these translations are inaccurate, anachronistic and ambiguous. The Vulgate used *molles* to translate the Greek term *malakoi* and *masculorum concubitores* for *arsenokoitai*. As Richie argues, "within the Bible *molles* is not used sexually – *molles,* much like the Greek *malakoi*, is not used in reference to a person's sexual identity, but with reference to their moral character."[13] Furthermore, Richie argues that effeminate is a highly subjective translation, as ideas of what constitutes effeminacy continuously evolve with time.

[10] NIV.
[11] ESV.
[12] KJV; TLB.
[13] Cristina Richie, "An Argument against the Use of the Word 'homosexual' in English Translations of the Bible," *The Heythrop Journal* 51 (April 23, 2009): 724, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.2009.00496.x.

As for the term *arsenokoitai*, which has often been translated as "homosexual" or "sodomite," its lack of appearance before the Pauline epistles suggests it may have been coined by Paul himself and should likewise be translated according to the context in which he was writing. In Romans 13:13, Paul uses *koitai* to refer to excessive sexual activity in general, and in the Septuagint, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 use *arseno* for "man" and *koiten* for "intercourse." While a surface reading may take *arsenokoitai* to mean homosexual activity, the historical context suggests otherwise. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians in 55 CE, pederasty was a common Greek practice, in which there would be a sexual relationship between an older man and younger boy. Some scholars have argued that this was an idealized form of friendship which would "initiate" the free boy into adulthood, while others argue it was more of an abusive relationship where a young slave was victimized by his master. In any case, this context informs Paul's choice to pair *malakoi* with *arsenokoitai,* as the commonality of the practice in Corinth certainly would have concerned him. This is also why the conflation of the two terms as simply "homosexuality" is misleading and harmful, as rather than listing pedophilia among the vices, all homosexual relationships have been forced to take its place.[14]

[14] Ibid., 723–28; Robert K. Gnuse, "Seven Gay Texts: Biblical Passages Used to Condemn Homosexuality," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 45, no. 2 (May 2015): 80, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107915577097.

Another critical text to examine is Genesis 19 and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, which is perhaps the biblical story most synonymous with Christian condemnation of homosexuality. Traditional interpretation argues that Sodom was destroyed because the men of the town were homosexuals. Importantly, however, those employing this interpretation typically only discuss Genesis 19 without discussing its sister text, Judges 19. Therefore, scholars like Robert Gnuse argue for the intertextuality between the two, or the understanding that the meaning of one text is influenced by the other. Consider how closely the two narratives align:

Table 1. *Similarities Between Genesis 19 and Judges 19*

Genesis	**Judges**
Angels enter the city of Sodom (19:1)	A Levite man, his concubine, and servant enter the city of Gibeah (19:15)
Lot invites angels to spend the night in his home (19:2)	Old man from Ephraim invites strangers to spend the night in his home (19:20)
Local men surround the home (19:4)	Local men surround the home (19:22)
Men call out for Lot to bring the visitors outside so that they may know them (19:5)	Men pound on the door for the old man to bring the man outside so that they may know him (19:22)
Lot refers to the men as brothers, tells them "Do not act so wickedly" (19:6-7)	Old man refers to the men as brothers, tells them "Do not act so wickedly" (19:23)
Lot offers daughters to the crowd, says to do with the women whatever they please (19:8)	Old man offers his daughter and the Levite's concubine, says to do with them whatever they please (19:24)
The angels pull Lot back into the house (19:10)	The Levite pushes concubine out to the crowd (19:25)
The men of Sodom are struck blind (19:11)	The concubine is raped (19:25)

Source: Gnuse, Robert K. "Seven Gay Texts: Biblical Passages Used to Condemn Homosexuality." Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture 45, no. 2 (May 2015): 68–87. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107915577097.

When taken together, it becomes evident that the two narratives are indeed mirror images of one another, and the greater detail provided by Judges can illuminate the sins of Sodom. Within the narratives themselves, both the men of Sodom and Gibeah say they wish "to know" the men/man inside the home, and in the case of Sodom, "to know" has often been understood to mean

homosexual activity. The Hebrew verb יָדַע or *yada* appears 943 times in the Old Testament, where only ten of those instances refer to sexual activity.[15] This is where Judges provides evidence against the argument that men of Sodom were simply homosexuals, as Gnuse argues that the use of *yada* in this context more likely refers to the men's intentions to rape the visitors. Specifically, he argues that the focus of both narratives is the issue of "power rape," or sexual violence for the purpose of humiliation and degradation, regardless of a person's typical sexual preferences. In both stories, the hosts offer women instead of their male guest(s), with Lot's two daughters in Genesis and the old man of Ephraim's daughter and the Levite's concubine in Judges. While both crowds reject this initial offer, the concubine in nevertheless pushed out into the crowd, is raped by the men of Gibeah, and eventually dies because of the violence they inflict on her. Thus, the threat of rape to the Levite man and the actual rape of his concubine, both of whom were strangers to the town, informs the intentions of the men of Sodom with the angels.[16] While some scholars insist that threat of rape to the Levite man still implies their homosexuality, this argument is reductive as it fails to consider the actual rape of the concubine woman who was also a stranger, and the men's refusal of the old man's daughter and of Lot's two daughters, all of whom were local to the town.

Another argument against the traditional reading of Genesis 19 is that, in both cases, the townsmen violate the customs of hospitality. This notion, though heavily criticized by traditional interpreters, finds support elsewhere in the Bible; in Ezekiel 16:48-50, the prophet states "behold this was the iniquity of Sodom thy sister, pride, fulness of bread, and abundance, and the idleness of her, and of her daughters: and they did not put forth their hand to the needy, and the poor."[17]

[15] Gen. 4:1, 17, 25; 24:16; 38:26; Judg. 11:39; 19:22, 25; 1 Sam. 1:19; 1 Kings 1:4.
[16] Gnuse, "Seven Gay Texts," 71–73.
[17] Vulgate.

In Wisdom of Solomon 19:13-17, "for they exercised a more detestable inhospitality than any: others indeed received not strangers unknown to them...but they were struck with blindness."[18] While the Vulgate does not mention Sodom by name, the 1611 King James Version begins 19:14 with "For the *Sodomits* did not receive those whom they knew not when they came..." Even in the New Testament, Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 10:14-15 "and whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words...it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrha in the day of judgement, than for that city," a message which is echoed in Luke 10:10-12.[19]

To be sure, the arguments presented above are not particular to the modern era. Patristic writers, too, understood the sins of Sodom to include their inhospitality and threats of violence against the male angels. How, then, has Genesis 19 become so inextricably linked with Christianity's condemnation of homosexuality, especially when homosexuality as it is known today did not exist when the Bible was written? Mark Jordan has argued that Genesis 19 has had such a lasting impact on the collective conscience because it became a symbol of divine retribution. In Judges, when the Levite man discovers the death of his concubine, he dismembers her body and sends the pieces to the tribes of Israel as a call for revenge and the men of Gibeah are killed by the Israelite army. In comparison, Genesis ends with the men of Sodom being struck blind by the angels before their town is destroyed. The difference is clear – one sin was punished by man, while the other was punished by God. Even when Sodom is referenced elsewhere in the Bible, it is discussed in vague terms and usually with the intention to evoke an image of destruction that follows a divine judgement. According to Jordan, it becomes a "memorial site that records God's power to judge. It refers not to specific human actions, but to a

[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

story that is to be remembered for its present pertinence...a most articulate reminder of the consequences of rebelling against God."[20]

It is also important to consider the processes by which Sodom transformed into "sodomy" and "sodomite" as these are categories that continue to stigmatize individuals in the 21st century. Throughout the Patristic period, Latin exegetes recognized the various Scriptural interpretations of Genesis 19 but ultimately zeroed in on its sexual interpretation. Ambrose (c. 339 – 397), for example, defined the sin of Sodom as luxury (*luxuria*) and disordered desire (*libido*). Jerome (c. 342 – 420) characterized it as "brazen arrogance bred of opulence" while also understanding it as a specific, yet unnamed, sexual act. Augustine described the sin as the desire for same-sex copulation, but with an important distinction. That is, he recognized that the men of Sodom wanted to rape the male angels and described Sodom as a place where "the debaucheries in men (*stupra in masculos*) flourished by custom," but it was not simply that the men wanted to have sex with the male angels. Rather, it was that they were driven mad by their disordered desire, and their reaction to the angels was a violent manifestation of their delirium. These dichotomous interpretations were then incorporated into the Vulgate, where Jerome used *luxuria* to translate a range of sins regarding the flesh and opposition to God. It was Gregory the Great (c. 540 – 604), however, that helped to establish for medieval theologians the place of *luxuria* among the seven capital vices: *superbia* (pride), *avaritia* (greed), *luxuria* (lust), *ira* (wrath), *gula* (gluttony), *invidia* (envy), and *acedia* (sloth). Gregory defines *luxuria* as a sexual, fleshly sin that he describes as staining and polluting, and is connected with effeminacy and animality.[21]

[20] Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*, The Chicago Series on Sexuality, History, and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 30–32.
[21] Ibid., 33–40.

The first appearance of *sodomia* is disputed among scholars, although Jordan argues that its first significant use comes from Peter Damian (1007 – c. 1072/73). In *Liber Gomorrhainus*, he defines sodomy by its relation to *blashphemia*, saying "If blasphemy is the worst sin, I do not know in what way sodomy is any better." The significance of Damian's use of *sodomia* is, as Jordan argues, that,

> *Sodomia* does not make its appearance as a neutral description of acts. It is a brand that burns condemnation into certain acts. It burns into them as well the presumption of a stable essence, a sameness found wherever the acts are performed. The sameness links those who perform them back to the criminals who suffered the most severe divine punishment...They are no longer persons who perform a few similar acts from a myriad of motives and in incalculably different circumstances. They are Sodomites doing Sodomy. They abstractive power of the word abolishes motives and circumstances.

In other words, it is the essentializing nature of the terms "sodomy" and "sodomite" that make them especially pernicious. Critically, however, it should be noted that when Peter Damian wrote of sodomy, he was only concerned with the sexual sins of the clergy, not the laity. Moreover, *Liber Gomorrhainus* was not very popular in his own time, as Johansson and Percy have noted that it was largely dismissed by Pope Leo IX (1049-54).[22]

Conclusion

By examining the historical contexts of the Scriptures frequently used as leverage against women and queer people, more nuanced understandings begin to emerge. Complementarianism is supported by literal readings of Genesis and the Pauline epistles, yet critical examination demonstrates how such readings obscure the authors' original intentions. Similarly, biblical scholarship further reveals how modern translations, such as the appearance of "homosexual" in modern Bibles, imbue the text with modern meanings.

[22] Johansson and Percy, "Homosexuality," 167.

Chapter Three: Abortion

Dobbs v. Jackson (2022) overturned *Roe v. Wade* (1973) just shy of its fiftieth anniversary. Stating that the right to abortion access is not conferred by the Constitution, the Court's decision handed regulatory power over abortion access to individual states. Writing for the majority, Justice Samuel Alito criticized *Roe* for running contrary to "an unbroken tradition of prohibiting abortion on pain of criminal punishment [that] persisted from the earliest days of common law until 1973."[1] Alito rooted his analysis of common law in Henry de Bracton's thirteenth century treatise which states "If one strikes a pregnant woman or gives her poison in order to procure an abortion, if the foetus is already formed or quickened, especially if it is quickened, he commits homicide."[2] What Alito failed to do is precisely what he criticized *Roe* for doing, that is, he failed to consider the prevailing cultural, medical, and theological attitudes that surrounded abortion in the Middle Ages.

First, the *Bracton* was a summary of England's laws and customs but was not a statute itself. John Riddle found in his survey of English common law at the time that there is reasonable doubt as to the actual standing of such a law regarding abortion. Rather, as Riddle argues, Bracton was commenting on principles that he believed should have existed, which had no bearing on their actual existence in common law.[3] Similarly, Paul Brand has argued that *Bracton* is not the most reliable source of Common Law, and J.L. Barton has argued that *Bracton* is the "doctrine of the author rather than the judges."[4] In other words, when Alito rooted his "unbroken tradition" abortion's criminality, he was not quoting a statute, nor was he quoting the law as it

[1] Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, 573 U.S. at 25.
[2] Harvard Law School Library, "Bracton Online," vol. 2, 341.
[3] John M. Riddle, *Eve's Herbs : A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1997), 95–97, http://archive.org/details/evesherbshistory0000ridd.
[4] Paul Brand, "The Age of Bracton," *Proceedings of the British Acadamy* 89 (1996): 84–86.

was practiced. At any rate, examining what Bracton meant by a "quickened" fetus is still important to the present discussion.

Augustinian philosophy of ensoulment stated that the embryo would first exist in a vegetative state before progressing into an animal-like sensitive state. It is only in the final, intellective stage that the fetus can be considered a living being: God inserts a soul, animating the fetus. This process is called the quickening and is signaled by the first fetal movements. Augustine of Hippo, whose writings would greatly influence the way the Church would regard the formation of a fetus, followed Aristotle's lead.[5] Augustine's commentary in *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum VII* on Exodus 21:22 reads,[6]

> If what is brought forth is unformed (*informe*), but at this state some sort of living, shapeless thing (*informiter*), then the law of homicide would not apply, for it could not be said that there was a living soul in that body, for it lacks all sense, if it be such as it not yet formed (*nondum formata*) and therefore not yet endowed with its senses.[7]

In other words, before the quickening, a fetus was not considered to be a rational, human being. It was the soul, bestowed by God, that gave it humanity, not the parents at conception. Later theologians like Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, and Giles of Rome each wrote concurring opinions on the matter of ensoulment. It was in the time between conception and the quickening when medieval women could generally terminate "what we, but not medieval people, call pregnancy." Thus, because it was not yet a pregnancy, anything pre-quickening was contraceptive, while an abortion was termination post-quickening. To be sure, this is not to say that abortions or contraceptives were endorsed by the Church; both were considered a sin, but contraception was a lower sin than abortion. Some theologians also recognized that there could

[5] Riddle, *Eve's Herbs*, 83–84.
[6] "Questions on Exodus by Augustine of Hippo," Patristic Bible Commentary, n.d., https://sites.google.com/site/aquinasstudybible/home/exodus/questions-on-exodus-by-augustine-of-hippo.
[7] Riddle, *Eve's Herbs*, 84.

be a grey area between right and wrong. Albertus, for instance, responded to the assertion that contraceptive was homicide by arguing that that was far too firm a stance which did not account for the fallibility of humanity. While human intervention in conception and birth was a sin, there were always going to be extenuating circumstances.[8]

Of course, while the Aristotelian embryology was the dominant view, that is not to say it was the only view. Ecclesiastical pronouncements and penitentials, however, were inconsistent. Some condemned just abortions, while other also included contraception in their condemnation. Some penitentials took the woman's motivation into account, as the sin was much graver for a woman who sought to conceal fornication than it was for a woman who could not afford to feed a child.[9] While abortion was mentioned in *Penitential of Finnian, Irish Canons,* and *Old Irish Penitential*, it was still a lower sin among the rest and was not equated to homicide.[10] In other words, the institutional church did not have a set position on the matter of abortion.

More dissonance on the Church's stance is demonstrated by the works of high-ranking clergy which talk about abortifacients, or drugs used to induce termination. Perhaps the most notable of which, *Treasury of Medicines for the Poor*, was written by Pope John XXI (1276 – 1277) prior to his papacy. Written in response to the rising costs of medical care, it was meant as a guide for the poor on how to use medicinal herbs found in nature. Riddle argues that *Treasury* is the "greatest single source of information" on medieval birth control methods, and that it was a popular text in its time.[11] Marbode, Bishop of Rennes, who was a leading writer on herbal

[8] Ibid., 30–31.
[9] Ibid., 89.
[10] Maeve B. Callan, "Of Vanishing Fetuses and Maidens Made-Again: Abortion, Restored Virginity, and Similar Scenarios in Medieval Irish Hagiography and Penitentials," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21, no. 2 (2012): 292.
[11] Riddle, *Eve's Herbs*, 33.

medicine, wrote of the "the mother herb," artemisia, along with many other herbs that could be used for contraception.[12]

Childbirth certainly posed a much greater risk to medieval women, especially if there were complications during childbirth. Fiona Stoertz found in her study of medieval childbirth that in such cases, the woman's life was prioritized over the child's. Stoertz argues that "while many medieval people were anxious to have children, they were nevertheless very much concerned with alleviating the suffering and ensuring the survival of women, even at the expense of children."[13] This concern for the wellbeing of the mother is certainly found lacking in many of the current abortion bans.

Conclusion

Abortion has always been a rather contentious issue. Nevertheless, contention is not the same as the universal criminalization presented in Alito's opinion. The point to be made is here is that there was no single view of contraception and abortion in the medieval period. In fact, contrary to what Alito imagines, there seems to be a bit more empathy for the mother than there is for pregnant people today. While contraception and abortion were sinful, it was not always thought about in absolutes. Some theologians took the mother's life circumstances into consideration, something modern bans do not. Similarly, the life of the mother was prioritized in the event of complications during labor, while modern physicians are being forced to neglect patient's health as long as a fetal heartbeat can still be detected. Thus, it appears Alito's faith in the stability of medieval perceptions of abortion was misplaced indeed.

[12] Ibid., 32.
[13] Fiona Harris Stoertz, "Suffering and Survival in Medieval English Childbirth," in *Medieval Family Roles: A Book of Essays* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 109, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203063392.

Chapter Four: Imagining Christ

Throughout the history of Christianity, the figure of Jesus has been adapted to suit the needs of the dominant group. Within modern conservative evangelicalism, for instance, Jesus has been variously reconfigured as the conquering Christ who "brings peace through the sword,"[1] the business executive, the crusading knight, the rural laborer, or the NRA member. Moreover, the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) has been known to promote the (heretical) doctrine of the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father which, as Barr argues, grounds the council's understanding of complementarianism and the nature of authority and submission that it prescribes.[2] That is, if Jesus is eternally subordinate to God, then women must be eternally subordinate to men. Although seemingly contradictory, the images of Christ the conqueror and Christ the submissive both serve to substantiate evangelicals' essentialized gender binary as well as the complementarianism which follows. Thus, the ultra-masculine Christ reassert men's authority and leadership, while the subordinate Christ reasserts women's submission. Medieval depictions of Christ certainly complicate this narrative and are therefore a useful site for understanding the fluidity of gender.

As Mother

The use of maternal imagery and language by male writers when discussing either themselves or Christ was popular in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, although examples can be found well before then. Paul, for instance, used maternal imagery more often than he did paternal in his letters, and described himself as a pregnant, birthing, and nursing mother. Anselm

[1] Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 89.
[2] Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 193.

of Canterbury (c. 1033 – 1109) was one of the first medieval writers to recognize Paul's use of maternal language.[3] Although Anslem rejected the conceptualization of God as mother, he nevertheless described both Paul and Jesus as motherly figures, writing,

> You [Paul] are among Christians like a nurse who not only cares for her children but also gives birth to them a second time by the solicitude of her marvelous love...But you, Jesus, good lord, are you not also mother? Are you not that mother who, like a hen, collects her chickens under her wings? Truly, master, you are a mother...Paul, mother,...lay then your dead son [i.e., the sinful soul] at the feet of Christ, your mother, for he is her son. Or rather throw him into the bosom [*sinus*] of Christ's love, for Christ is even more his mother. Pray that he may revive this dead son, not so much yours as his. Do, mother of my soul, what the mother of my flesh would do.[4]

Maternal imagery of this type was particularly popular among the works of Cistercian monks. On why the practice was so common, Caroline Walker Bynum argues that "all twelfth-century Cistercian writers use[d] maternal imagery to add something to authority figures qua rulers or fathers, and the something added was always nurturing, affectivity, and accessibility."[5] This focus on the accessibility of Christ can be explained by the broader shifts in Christianity happening at the time, particularly the theological shifts that happened after the Gregorian Reform. Writers began placing greater stress on God creating humanity in his image and likeness and on Christ's taking of humanity into himself.[6] Additionally, the twelfth century saw a greater emphasis being placed on the veneration of the Virgin Mary, especially with the Cistercians who viewed devotion to Mary "as the gateway by which salvation entered the world."[7]

The methods writers used when describing a motherly Christ varied, though writers often attributed to him breasts or a womb and depicted him as bleeding, nourishing, or giving birth.

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[3] Ibid., 52–53.
[4] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, 1st ed. (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1984), 113–14.
[5] Ibid., 154.
[6] Ibid., 16–17.
[7] Ibid., 136–37; Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 29.

Bernard of Clairvaux (c. 1090 – 1153), for instance, almost always used breasts as a symbol of nourishment, affectivity, and instruction; in one letter, he wrote "Do not let the roughness of our life frighten your tender years. If you feel the stings of temptation...suck not so much the wounds as the breasts of the Crucified. He will be your mother, and you will be his son."[8] Adam of Perseigne (c. 1145 – 1221) also used nursing to describe the soul's relationship to the divine; however, instead of Christ, it was the Virgin Mary who was nursing and "we, the children, drink Christ, the milk, at the Virgin's breasts and so become the brothers of Christ in a special sense, those who nurse at the breast alongside him."[9] According to humorism, when a woman was pregnant, her body would use her superfluous blood to create breast milk.[10] This blood/milk association as a means of nourishment is found throughout theologians' depictions of Jesus as mother, particularly in relation to the side wound. Indeed, the site where Christ was stabbed by a Roman soldier's spear became allegorized as a womb that provided both shelter and nourishment. Guerric of Igny (c. 1070/80 – 1157) used images of pregnancy and the womb to communicate unity, safety, and fertility; he imagined the soul as hiding in the wounds of Christ: "For in his loving kindness and his compassion he opened his side in order that the blood of the wound might give you life...There you will lie hidden in safety." Aelred of Rievaulx (1110 – 1167) wrote about John reclining on Christ's breasts and used the side wound to discuss the complex connections between the body, blood, milk, and water, wherein "John drinks the wine of knowledge of God, whereas the soul of the ordinary believer feeds on the milk that flows from Christ's humanity. The blood that flows from the wound in Christ's side becomes wine, the

[8] Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, 117.
[9] Ibid., 124.
[10] Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, 35–36.

water becomes milk, and the soul not only draws nurture from Christ but also flees for refuge into the wound in the wall of his body."[11]

Throughout the depictions of Jesus as mother, the core message is motherly love. As a mother, Christ is a figure of unconditional love and safety who nourishes his children and guides them toward salvation. Jesus as father, then, becomes the figure of authority and discipline. Anselm, who held that men were superior to women and that men played a much larger role in matters of generation, wrote that Paul and Jesus were "mothers by affection; fathers by authority, mothers by kindness; fathers by protection, mothers by compassion."[12] Guerric, too, associated the father with authority and the mother with love and nurture.[13] Although Bernard attributed maternal characteristics to Christ, and even showed immense devotion to Mary, he nevertheless remained critical of actual women.[14] Indeed, what is striking about this dichotomy is not so much the stereotypical gendering of the parental roles, but the fact that elsewhere in the writings of clergymen, Eve and the term "woman" itself are still associated with weakness, temptation, impurity, and so on. In other words, the positive aspects of femininity and motherhood seem to apply more readily to Christ rather than to women themselves.

As Bridegroom

Beyond imagining Christ as a motherly figure, Bernard of Clairvaux also imagined Christ as Bridegroom, the soul's (Bride's) heavenly partner in spiritual matrimony. He develops this narrative through his allegorical reading of the Song of Songs, on which he wrote a full eighty-

[11] Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, 123.
[12] Ibid., 114.
[13] Ibid., 120-22.
[14] Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 29; McNamara, "The Herrenfrage: The Reconstructing of the Gender System, 1050-1150," 22.

six sermons. The Bride could be understood "collectively as the Church, individually as the Virgin Mary or any loving soul, or more concretely as the female recluse or nun."[15] In describing the complex, passionate Christology that Bernard develops through his sermons, Mark Burrows explains that as an exegete, Bernard sought to move the hearts of his monastic brothers rather than to explain the literal meaning of the scripture. Monastic life was, for Bernard, a way to make meaning out of the convergence of scripture and lived experience, and inspiring affective contemplation through an eroticized vision of Christ was a way to encourage meaning making.[16]

Throughout his sermons, Bernard emphasized the nature of mutual desire between Christ and the human soul, as God "wanted to recapture the affection of carnal people who were unable to love in any other way." Thus, the monk would embark on a journey from carnal to rational love before ultimately reaching spiritual love, where "violent desire...burning thirst, [and] frequent meditation" would draw him towards Christ the "tender lover."[17] On the ultimate union with Christ, Bernard wrote,

> What more to be desired than this charity, which makes the soul, content no longer with a human master, boldly approach the Word Himself, cleave to Him and consult Him about everything with a quickness of perception proportionate to the intensity of her desire? This is a true bond of holy, spiritual marriage; and indeed, when conformity of will makes of the two one spirit, it is more than a bond, it is an embrace...It is this which makes them Bridegroom and Bride; for it is the love peculiar to those joined in wedlock, and nobody else, not even a child, can share it...for it is not possible for a soul to love thus and not be beloved, and it is this reciprocity of love between the two that constitutes complete and perfect marriage.[18]

[15] Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature*, Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 138.
[16] Mark S. Burrows, "Foundations for an Erotic Christology: Bernard of Clairvaux on Jesus as 'Tender Lover,'" *Anglican Theological Review* 80, no. 4 (Fall 1998): 480–81.
[17] Ibid., 482–83.
[18] Bernard of Clairvaux, *Saint Bernard on the Song of Songs; Sermones in Cantica Canticorum* (London, A.R. Mowbray; New York, Morehouse-Gorham, 1952), 258–60, http://archive.org/details/saintbernardonso0000bern.

Thus, the monk who embodies the role of the Bride takes on an inherently feminine role in their spiritual marriage to Christ, the Bridegroom. The language of love that Bernard develops through his sermons greatly impacted the subsequent language used to by Christian mystics to talk about their experiences, particularly that of *brautmystik*, or bridal mysticism.[19]

Bonaventure (1221 – 1274) also wrote about Christ the Bridegroom when he wrote *The Life of Saint Francis*. On the devotion of St. Francis (1181 – 1226),

> Of the ardent love that glowed in Francis, the friend of the Bridegroom, who can avail to tell? He seemed utterly consumed, like unto a coal that is set on fire, by the flame of the love divine. For, at the mere mention of the love of the Lord, he was aroused, moved, and enkindled, as though the inner chords of his heart vibrated under the bow of the voice from without...Christ Jesus Crucified was laid, as a bundle of myrrh, in his heart's bosom, and he yearned to be utterly transformed into Him by the fire of his exceeding love.[20]

Similarly, *The Little Flowers of St. Francis* discusses Friar John of La Verna's bridal mysticism. John was intensely devout, such that "his heart was so mightily kindled by the flames of love divine," and so virtuous that his soul was lifted up "to the loving and ineffable embraces of Christ." Despite John's devotion, God withdrew from the friar as a test of faith. John was of course devastated, and so he went up the holy mount of La Verna and ran through the woods in search of Christ, "calling with a loud voice and with tears and sighs on the beloved spouse of his soul, who had withdrawn and departed from him...but in no place nor in any wise could he find the sweet Jesus again, nor taste again, as he was wont to do, of those sweetest spiritual savors of the love of Christ." When Christ eventually appeared to him, John tearfully entreated him to stay, yet "Christ departed and spake him no word, nor gave aught of consolation and did after the way of a mother with her child, when she maketh him yearn for the breast, and causeth him to follow

[19] Rosalynn Voaden, "Mysticism and the Body," in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 3–4, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199582136.013.024.
[20] Bonaventure, *The Life Of St. Francis* (London: J. M. Dent and Co: Aldine House, 1904), 94–95, https://www.ecatholic2000.com/bonaventure/assisi/francis.shtml#__RefHeading___Toc351061202.

after her weeping, that he may take it the more willingly." When it is finally determined that John was truly devoted, Christ offered his hands for John to kiss, "and when Friar John had kissed them, he drew nigh and leaned on Christ's bosom and embraced Him and kissed Him, and Christ likewise embraced and kissed him."[21]

The account of John's visions of Christ is significant because it demonstrates the total blurring of the lines between traditionally masculine and feminine roles. Both figures in this scenario are genderfluid; John is simultaneously the Bride searching for her estranged spouse, and the son yearning for his mother. Christ is likewise both Bridegroom and mother. Moreover, John assumes a second feminine role within the narrative, just before he and Christ embrace. John kneels before Christ and washes his feet with his tears, just as Mary Magdalen.

As Nonbinary

Along with depictions of a feminized Christ in prose, the twelfth-century theologians also speculated about the gender of Christ himself. In book three of *Sentences*, Peter Lombard (1096 – 1160) questioned whether Jesus could have been born a woman. He arrives at the conclusion that, while a female Christ could have been possible, it would have been less appropriate than his male form.[22] Joan Gibson argues that Lombard's questioning nevertheless suggested contemporary interest in the subject, and that in the three hundred years that followed, *Sentences* "dominated theological studies and the issue was kept in philosophical and theological consciousness."[23] Leah DeVun adds that although the commentaries on *Sentences* rejected the

[21] Robert Steele, *The Little Flowers Of St. Francis* (J.M.Dent, London, 1910), 89–91, http://archive.org/details/dli.bengal.10689.9318.
[22] Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 188.
[23] Joan Gibson, "Could Christ Have Been Born a Woman? A Medieval Debate," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8, no. 1 (1992): 66.

idea of a female Christ, theologians' considerations raised questions about the reconciliation of male and female into one being.[24]

DeVun has also discussed how the nonbinary Christ can be found in alchemical texts. Alchemists, who sought to make sense of the composition of matter, often employed medical and religious imagery to explain the complex processes of chemical change. One such image was the Jesus hermaphrodite,[25] whose dual sexed body was "*both* and *neither*,"[26] and wholly comprised of both his mother and father in his humanity and divinity. An anonymous work from fifteenth century Germany portrays Christ as "the ultimate nonbinary figure."[27] The author of *The Book of the Holy Trinity* asserted that Christ was inseparable from his mother, Mary, who represents his humanity just as he is inseparable from his father, or his divinity. Regarding Christ and Mary, the author states that "the two are thus eternal without end...And they have been eternally one, the Divinity Jesus Christ, which cannot and could not be separated eternally from his exterior humanity, thus Jesus-Mary is and was one being in the same substance."[28] Similarly, Sophie Sexton has argued that the feminized Christ, rather than signaling a full transition from male to female, was instead a manifestation of the nonbinary Christ. Moreover, Sexton notes that his fluidity between the masculine and feminine personas is not limited to theologians' writings but rather is marked by his transfiguration, transubstantiation, and his humanity/divinity. Sexton also

[24] DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, 188.
[25] Ibid., 6-7; The term "hermaphrodite" derives from the Greco-Roman myth of Hermaphroditus, the dual-sexed god who was the child of Hermes and Aphrodite. In the premodern context, hermaphrodite was used to describe a variety of individuals, including those who would be considered intersex or transgender today, but it also had mythological connotations. Today the term is considered derogatory and is generally understood to refer to intersex people.
[26] Leah DeVun, "The Jesus Hermaphrodite: Science and Sex Difference in Premodern Europe," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 2 (2008): 194.
[27] Ibid., 186.
[28] Ibid., 185.

analyzes late medieval devotional objects depicting Christ's side wound in order to further demonstrate his genderfluid nature.[29]

Conclusion

The fluidity of Christ's gender speaks to the instability of what it meant to be male or female. Divine embodiment, whether it be Christ himself or the faithful soul, existed beyond the corporeal limits of the physical body. The feminine or nonbinary body was a site of contemplation, and its worship necessitated the believer to transgress their own gender in order to achieve unity with the divine. This context is significant as attacks on gender affirming care send the message that trans bodies do not align with "traditional Christian values." Medieval depictions of Christ challenge the assertion that such values are inherently cisgendered and affirm the historical continuity of the gender spectrum.

[29] Sexton, Sophie, "Gender-Querying Christ's Wound: A Non-Binary Interpretation of Christ's Body in Late Medieval Imagery," in *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, by Sophie Sexon (NL Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 134–35, https://doi.org/10.5117/9789462988248.

Chapter Five: Trans Role Models in Medieval Hagiography

Saints were, for medieval people, the closest thing to what people today would consider celebrities. Their lives, or *vitae*, were preserved through written accounts, and retold endlessly through sermons and plays. Their bodily relics were housed in shrines and became sites of pilgrimage to their devotees. The saints represented the ideal Christian paradigm, and stories of their sanctity provided something to aspire to, even if it was idealized. Hagiography presented medieval people with both *imitanda,* virtues that should be aspired to and could be emulated, as well as *admiranda,* supernatural thus unattainable powers that could only be revered.[1] To be sure, hagiographies are not reliable historical sources, nor are they objective biographies. Rather, they are idealized, sometimes fictionalized, accounts which were subjected to the biased and gendered editing of the religious men who wrote them down. One can never know for certain how representative a *vita* is of the actual historical figure, if such a figure ever existed to begin with in some cases. Nevertheless, hagiography serves as a useful tool for the study of medieval gender, particularly through the ways in which they both supported and subverted gender norms.[2] As Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt argue, audiences could find communion in the "emotional and haptic traces of existences" that illuminated their own, particularly for the gender

[1] Callan, "Of Vanishing Fetuses and Maidens Made-Again: Abortion, Restored Virginity, and Similar Scenarios in Medieval Irish Hagiography and Penitentials," 284.
[2] Maeve Callan, *Sacred Sisters: Gender, Sanctity, and Power in Medieval Ireland* (NL Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 16–17, https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463721509; Callan, "Of Vanishing Fetuses and Maidens Made-Again: Abortion, Restored Virginity, and Similar Scenarios in Medieval Irish Hagiography and Penitentials," 284–85; Donald M. Steele, "With All God's People: Toward a Protestant Reclaiming of the Communion of the Saints," *Theology Today* 51, no. 4 (January 1, 1995): 543, https://doi.org/10.1177/004057369505100405; Sam Riches and Miriam Gill, "Pilgrims and Pilgrimage: Patterns of Pilgramage in England c. 1100-1500," The University of York, accessed April 2, 2023, https://www.york.ac.uk/projects/pilgrimage/content/med_saint.html; Sarah Salih, "Saints and Sanctity in Medieval England," British Library, 2018, https://www.bl.uk/medieval-literature/articles/saints-and-sanctity-in-medieval-england.

non-conforming reader who saw themselves represented in the *vitae* and knew they were not alone.[3]

Historians have long been fascinated with the *vitae* of gender non-conforming saints, often categorizing them as 'transvestites' or 'cross-dressers.' Both terms, which are used synonymously with one another, are used to describe an individual who wears clothes of the opposite gender. Both terms are also considered outdated and derogatory, as using either in relation to trans individuals reduces the trans experience to a matter of clothing choice.[4] M.W. Bychowski has argued that there is a "variation in the familiarity with, and affirmation of, trans-ness evident in both medieval texts and modern medieval studies through inconsistencies in pronoun choice, or the willingness to retain the expressed gender identity of the trans figure in one respect but not in others."[5] As such, she argues for a reading that considers how trans saints embodied authenticity.

The present study will provide three cases of trans saints, though to be clear, this is by no means an exhaustive list. Medieval hagiography presents a rich tapestry of queer embodiment and gender non-conformity. First, this study will look at Saint Marinos, whose story of taking on a male identity represents one of the most popular themes in hagiography. Next, it looks at the legend of Saint Wilgefortis, the saint whose genderfluidity became a signal of her divinity. Finally, this survey will conclude with Joan of Arc in order to demonstrate how saints lives were not confined to legends.

[3] Gutt and Spencer-Hall, *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, 14.
[4] Ibid., 322.
[5] Gabrielle M. W. Bychowski, "The Authentic Lives of Transgender Saints: Imago Dei and Imitatio Christi in the Life of St Marinos the Monk," in *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography* (NL Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 249, https://doi.org/10.5117/9789462988248.

Saint Marinos

Saint Marinos' story represents one of the more common narratives, as multiple saints' legends follow the same general structure. When Marinos' mother died, his father, Eugenios, decided to join a monastery. Marinos (Mary at the time) cut his hair and took on male clothes so that he could join his father. Marinos was very devout, such that when even he was accused of assaulting a woman who became pregnant out of wedlock, he accepted the blame. Marinos was banished from the monastery, so he lived for three years outside its gates with only scraps of bread for food. When the woman's child was old enough she sent him to be raised by Marinos, which he did gladly. The monks were moved enough by his humility enough that they allowed Marinos back into the monastery but assigned him the most grueling chores, which he again accepted cheerfully. Upon Marinos' death, the monks prepared to bathe the corpse but discovered that Marinos was assigned female at birth.[6]

Many scholars have tried to understand what significance these legends had on early Christian thought, though in doing so limit their analyses to a cisnormative framework. Stephen Davis provides a thorough historiography that shows how scholars have attempted to explain the saints' trans-ness psychologically, sociologically, anthropologically, and theologically, though, as Bychowski argues, each "flatten transgender saints into projections of cisgender fears and desires."[7] Evelyn Patlagean's survey of manuscript evidence shows that legends of this type were being produced as early as the fifth century through the seventh century, that they waned in the eighth century, and then resurged in the ninth through eleventh centuries. In her intertextual

[6] Jacobus, *The Golden Legend. 1*, 4. print. and 1. paperback print (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Pr, 1995), 324–25; Alice-Mary Maffry Talbot, ed., "Life of St. Mary/Marinos," in *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*, trans. Nicholas Constas, Byzantine Saints' Lives in Translation 1 (Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996), 7–12.
[7] Bychowski, "The Authentic Lives of Transgender Saints: Imago Dei and Imitatio Christi in the Life of St Marinos the Monk," 254.

analysis, she argues that the saints represented a "transgressive sanctity" which challenged the norms of male authority and female subjugation by presenting an alternate image of female autonomy. Nicholas Constas develops Patlagean's thesis further by arguing that the ritualized transformation of visually becoming men was early Christian monasticism's bid of self-definition while trying to reconcile with its ambivalence over women's spirituality. Harvey contends that the crossdressing saints embody the "theological paradox of redemption," where their bodies serve as symbols of "purity and perdition." Finally, Castelli posits that the taking on of masculine visual markers illustrates how early Christian society was "reevaluating (and destabilizing) traditional gender differences in the context of a theology that called for personal and corporate transformation."[8]

Bychowski responds to these analyses by explaining that the danger in such readings is that they center on a cisnormative binary and assume that the saints were simply women in disguise, a line of reasoning that could easily lead to the conclusion that trans people did not exist in history.[9] Constas, for example, begins his translation of Marinos' *vita* by introducing the saint as a nun disguised as a monk.[10] Similarly, C. Libby argues in their historiography of historians' "transvestite saints" that the persistence of the nuns in disguise trope is part of a larger trend of "transgender pathologization" that links "subjects to degeneracy, sexual deviancy, and the unnatural."[11] Because this type of story is repeated across multiple saints' lives, it is obviously difficult to say whether Marinos was a real figure or not. However, the larger point is

[8] Stephen J. Davis, "Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10, no. 1 (2002): 6–10, https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2002.0003.
[9] Bychowski, "The Authentic Lives of Transgender Saints: Imago Dei and Imitatio Christi in the Life of St Marinos the Monk," 254.
[10] Talbot, "Life of St. Mary/Marinos," 1.
[11] C. Libby, "The Historian and the Sexologist," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (May 1, 2021): 172, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-8890537.

that reading their life as authentically trans rather than psychoanalyzing it allows for the recognition of a trans life that would otherwise go unnoticed or discredited.

Wilgefortis

The legend of Wilgefortis was perhaps one of the most well-known of the medieval saints, such that it was said to even rival the devotion to the Virgin Mary.[12] Wilgefortis was to be wed to a non-Christian suitor but having taken a vow of chastity, she prayed for a way to avoid the marriage. When she miraculously grew a beard, the suitor was repulsed and rescinded his proposal. Her father, outraged at the failed arrangement, had her crucified.[13] The similarities to Christ are immediately apparent; through her chastity, suffering, crucifixion, and martyrdom, Wilgefortis became an arresting image of *imitatio Christi*. This was reinforced by her cult, who often prayed to her when they were in need of comfort, liberation, or intercession.[14]

The fifteenth century artist Hieronymus Bosch captures this striking image in *Triptych of St Wilgefortis* (Fig. 1). The significance of Bosch's work, and of the numerous works of Wilgefortis that followed, is that they become what Marjorie Procter-Smith calls emancipatory images, or those that provide representation while also challenging the attitudes and behaviors toward a particular subject.[15] In the case of artworks depicting Wilgefortis, they challenge the gender normativity of religious imagery. Stephanie Budwey notes that while there are many examples of medieval textual and visual sources that reinforce the idea that humans are either

[12] Stephanie A. Budwey, "Saint Wilgefortis: A Queer Image for Today," *Religions* 13, no. 7 (July 2022): 2, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070616.
[13] Ibid., 3; Olivia Robinson and Elisabeth Dutton, "Drama, Performance, and Tough in the Medieval Convent and Beyond," in *Touching, Devotional Practices, and Visionary Experience in the Late Middle Ages* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 44, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26029-3.
[14] Budwey, "Saint Wilgefortis," 1.
[15] Ibid.

"*clearly* 'female' or *clearly* 'male' in the image of God," that there are also those that help to "expand religious imagination beyond the sex/gender binary."[16]

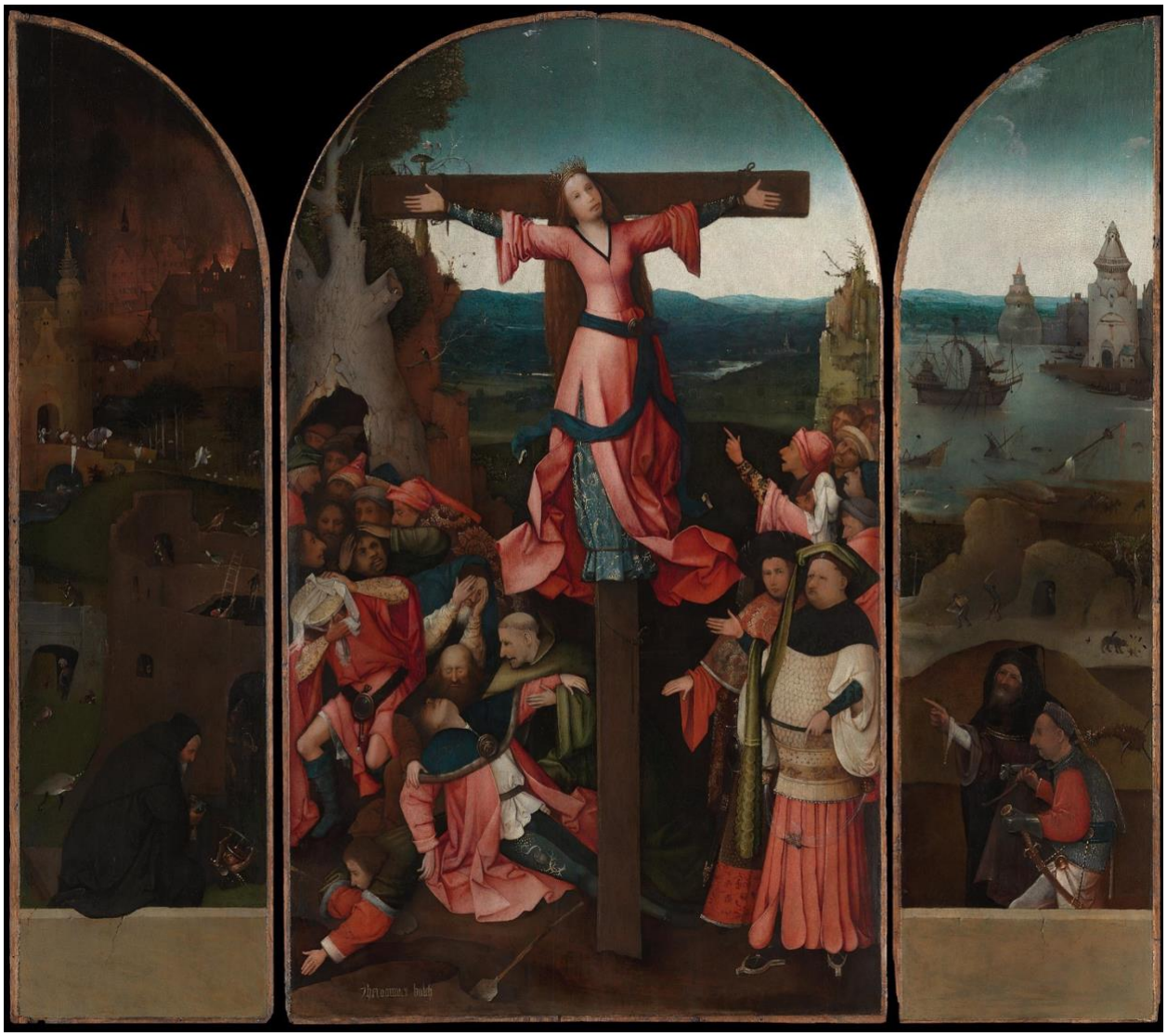

Figure 1. Hieronymus Bosch, Triptych of St. Wilgefortis (c. 1497), oil on panel. Photo Credit: http://boschproject.org, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BoschTheCrucifixionOfStJulia.jpg

The saint's ambiguous gender presentation meant that the images could be interpreted as male, female, or, to use DeVun's words, as both and neither. Olivia Robinson and Elisabeth Dutton observe that in Bosch's naturalistic portrayal of a beard on an otherwise feminine form

[16] Ibid.

that it signals "her unwillingness to perform through her body the role of wife" and that it facilitates her authentic *imitatio Christi*, "with whom she shares a profoundly ambiguously plurigendered body on the cross."[17] Moreover, it is possible that women viewing the images may have seen themselves in the crucified female form, potentially allowing them to feel a greater connection with Christ's own crucifixion.[18]

Saint Wilgefortis represents the ways in which medieval questions about the stability of the gender binary were often answered with religious language. The popularity of the saint's legend and imagery testifies to the fact that a nonbinary body could be, and was, seen as a locus of divinity. Ilse Friesen's study of the medieval depictions of Wilgefortis underscores their emancipatory nature, writing that they "constituted an attempt to transform the figure of Christ into a more universal and gender-inclusive symbol, thereby deconstructing the fixed binary opposites of male and female, as well as those of the human body."[19]

Joan of Arc

Joan of Arc (c. 1412 – 1431) has become a powerful figure for trans scholarship, due in large part to the authenticity she embodied. Joan's life serves as a particularly important site of reclamation for trans and queer history, as demonstrated by Demetra Demetriou who has discussed the way that France's far-right political party, Front National (FN),[20] has appropriated her story as a symbol of "nationhood, ancestral heritage, Catholic devotion, and national pride." Importantly, Demetriou notes that the FN's appropriation of Joan does not occur in a vacuum but

[17] Robinson and Dutton, "Drama, Performance, and Tough in the Medieval Convent and Beyond," 44–46.
[18] Budwey, "Saint Wilgefortis," 5.
[19] Ilse E. Friesen, *The Female Crucifix: Images of St. Wilgefortis Since the Middle Ages* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001), 133, https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/219/monograph/book/12171.
[20] Front National was renamed in 2018 to the Rassemblement National (National Rally, RN), but is here referred to as FN as per Demetriou's survey.

rather is part of the current rise in alt-right politics and the "worldwide crisis of tolerance and opposition."[21] Therefore, this study concludes this section on trans saints by providing a queer reading of the life and death of Joan of Arc, whose lived experience was constrained by the same close-mindedness of those that seek to claim her as their own.

Joan was from the village of Domrémy, where at age thirteen she began hearing voices that she later determined were the Archangel Saint Michael, Saint Margaret, and Saint Catherine, who were sent to guide her by God. They told her to go to France, which was in the midst of the Hundred Years' War, and to raise the siege of Orléans.[22] When she finally left for France in 1428, she began to wear men's clothing and to carry a sword with her. She convinced King Charles VII and his clergy of her divine mission and was granted with titular command of an army who rode with her to Orléans in 1429.[23] The English abandoned their siege soon after their arrival, the first of many military victories under Joan's leadership. Unfortunately, she was eventually captured and handed over to the English in 1430, where she was put on trial by Bishop Pierre Cauchon and accused of heresy. Cauchon begins the proceedings with the following statement:

> The reputation of this woman had already gone forth into many parts: how, wholly forgetful of womanly honesty, and having thrown off the bonds of shame, careless of all modesty of womankind, she wore with an astonishing and monstrous brazenness, immodest garments belonging to the male sex; how moreover, her presumptuousness had grown until she was not afraid to perform, to speak, and to disseminate many things contrary to the Catholic faith and hurtful to the article of the orthodox belief. And by so doing...she was said to be guilty of no inconsiderable offenses...the woman so defamed and suspected of heresy.[24]

[21] Demetra Demetriou, "Myth and the Rise of the Global Right: Amazons vs. Joan of Arc? Femen and the Front National," *Cultural Critique* 110, no. 1 (2021): 140–42, https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.2021.0005.
[22] W.P. Barrett, *The Trial of Jeanne D'Arc* (Gotham House, Inc., 1932), 43, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/joanofarc-trial.asp.
[23] Ibid., 61–64.
[24] Ibid., 2–3.

Throughout the trial transcript, the issue of her gender transgression was brought up incessantly.[25] Many times, she was asked if she believed she had committed a mortal sin by taking on men's attire, and each time she replied that she was following God's command which could not be a sin. Moreover, her voices and visions were determined to be demonic and that anyone who believed her had been "infected" by her "heretical evil."[26] On May 24, 1431, Joan interrupted the reading of her final sentence, recanted her statements, and agreed to take on women's dress once again. On May 28th, however, she had resumed wearing men's clothes "of her own will, under no compulsion, as she preferred man's to woman's dress."[27] On May 30th, she was condemned as a heretic and was burned at the stake.[28]

Bychowski has argued that Joan showed signs of gender dysphoria, which she notes can be experienced by trans and cis individuals alike.[29] While it cannot be said for certain whether or not Joan would have identified as trans were she alive today, it is clear that her life was cut short due in large part to her gender transgressions. She wore men's armor and carried a sword, she commanded an army, and, in a letter she send to the English, she describes herself as *chef de guerre* – war chief.[30] In all of these ways, she unapologetically inhabited a traditionally masculine role. While she insisted it was all at the command of God, through her final act of defiance, she demonstrated in her authenticity. By taking on men's clothing once again and of her own accord, she rejected the constraints placed on her identity.

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[25] Ibid.; To demonstrate, the issue of her dress is brought up in the following series of pages (though some mentions were certainly missed): 60, 78-79, 82, 100, 116-17, 119-120, 125-27, 135-36, 146, 160-67, 180, 193-94, 200, 206 230, 268, 271-73, 278, 281, 295-99, 318-19, 331-32, 343, 347-50.
[26] Barrett, *The Trial of Jeanne D'Arc*, 148–49.
[27] Ibid., 340–51.
[28] Ibid., 359–64.
[29] M. W. Bychowski, "The Patron Saint of Dysphoria: Joan of Arc as Transgender," Transliterature: Things Transform, May 28, 2019, http://www.thingstransform.com/2019/05/the-patron-saint-of-dysphoria-joan-of.html.
[30] Barrett, *The Trial of Jeanne D'Arc*, 174–75.

Conclusion

Veneration of trans saints provides further evidence that trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming bodies could be understood as sites of divinity. The difference here is that, as opposed to the depictions of a feminized or nonbinary Christ which were largely confined to monastic circles, saints belonged to the masses. Their *vitae* were shared far and wide among the laity, and given the abundance of trans saints, it is reasonable to assume that the large majority of medieval people would have been familiar with the saints' nonconformity. Moreover, for many of the saints, it was the very act of gender transgression itself which fostered proximity with the divine. Thus, where the Christian Right claims that gender nonconformity excludes queer and trans people from righteousness, medieval hagiography affirms their divinity.

Chapter Six: The Beguines' Pious Resistance

This final section serves as an ode to the medieval women who established for themselves authority and autonomy in spite of the constraints imposed on them by the Church and medieval society writ large. 'Women' were defined by men conceptually, often as a projection of their own anxieties and insecurities, as demonstrated through *exemplum* that configured women as dangerous and demonic. Women were the daughters of Eve, condemned to an eternity of penance on Earth for their disobedience, deceptiveness, and licentiousness.[1] Adam's only sin was listening to Eve, a mistake that men would not make again. When the Scholastics synthesized Aristotelian philosophy with that of the Church Fathers, women's moral and intellectual inferiority became natural and theological truths. This construction of the mythical 'woman' is nearly ubiquitous among medieval sources, yet it has no bearing on what actual women were like. History is written by those in positions of power and more often than not, women's voices go unheard. Therefore, this study offers a survey of the thirteenth-century beguines as a testament to women's voices, autonomy, and sense of self. In doing so, this study makes the argument that wherever there have been societies and institutions that sought to legislate women's bodies and identities, there have been women who resisted.

Argued to be "the first 'women's movement' in western history,"[2] the beguines first appeared in the thirteenth-century Low Countries but soon spread throughout Europe. They were an autonomous community of laywomen devoted to *vita apostolica* and *imitatio Christi*. Beguinages were typically located in urban areas and could be as small as a single house where a

[1] Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, 85–93. Gregg writes, "With the shadow of Eve in the background, and the doctrines and homilies of the church fathers in support, we should not wonder at the medieval view of women as insatiable, ineradicable sexual creatures, those Others—not like 'us'—composed of mysterious, almost nonhuman elements, like explosions of nature that imperiled a man's life by their forceful unpredictability." (93).
[2] Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, 14.

few women lived, or as large as an entire area of a city where thousands lived.[3] The beguines were chaste and did not marry, yet they did not take any formal vows and were not a formalized order. They existed entirely outside the bounds of both marital/familial and ecclesiastical male authority.[4] Beguines embodied personal and spiritual independence, a notion that often provoked the ire of the townsmen and clergy. They preached publicly and embraced "the call to holiness as every person's journey," rejecting the idea that holiness was restricted to the clergy.[5] They were also economically independent and supported themselves through skilled trade or investments. Since they paid taxes on their property and income, they had a certain level of protection from the church.[6]

As the Gregorian Reform was taking hold of the Church, the notion of *vita apostolica,* took hold of the laity who sought to imitate the lives of Christ and the apostles. This meant, among other things, taking on voluntary poverty and living life devoted to service and generosity to the poor. As a result of the growing market economy, followers of *vita apostolica* generally rejected the dependence on material goods. In contrast, the beguines' freedom depended on the market economy, and their sharp business acumen allowed them to raise money for the poor and to build infirmaries and almshouses for the sick and destitute.[7]

Another significant feature of the beguines was their embrace of mysticism. Western Christian mysticism was an incredibly complex and varied devotional practice, but in its most basic sense can be described as the desire to commune with the divine. Divine revelations of esoteric knowledge may be revealed to the mystic corporeally, spiritually, or intellectually.

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[3] Laura Swan, *The Wisdom of the Beguines : The Forgotten Story of a Medieval Women's Movement* (Katonah, New York : BlueBridge, an imprint of United Tribes Media Inc., 2016), 2, http://archive.org/details/wisdomofbeguines0000swan_c7j5.
[4] Carol Neel, "The Origins of the Beguines," *Signs* 14, no. 2 (1989): 321–25.
[5] Swan, *The Wisdom of the Beguines*, 12–13.
[6] Ibid., 14.
[7] Ibid., 17–19.

Mystical experiences can be either apophatic (*via negativa*) or cataphatic (*via positiva*); apophatic mysticism is experienced intellectually as a deep, inward knowing that is ultimately ineffable. Alternatively, cataphatic mysticism is experienced corporeally through bodily senses or spiritually through the soul and argues that the divine can be known and that what is revealed to the mystic can and should be shared with others.[8]

Patristic writers followed Augustine's hierarchy of mystical visions in which he privileged intellectual visions over corporeal and spiritual visions. He found cataphatic visions to be suspect because the bodily senses could be easily deceived, and such visions could be conjured by the devil. This typology was sustained throughout the Middle Ages and reinforced by the Scholastic's embrace of Dionysian mysticism,[9] built upon the works of pseudo-Dionysius the Aereopagite (late-fifth/early-sixth centuries) in which he argued that the mystic, through negative abstraction, is plunged "into the Darkness of Unknowing, whence all perfection of understanding is excluded, and he is enwrapped in that which is altogether intangible and noumenal...and through the inactivity of all his reasoning powers is united by his highest faculty to Him who is wholly unknowable; thus by knowing nothing he knows That which is beyond his knowledge."[10] Bernard of Clairvaux disrupted Augustine's typology when he argued that God was just as desirous of the soul as it was for him, and that "in the body and through the body he performed works of which not man but God was the author."[11] In other words, Bernard's sermons on the Song of Songs elevated corporeal and spiritual visions and greatly impacted the subsequent language used to describe mystical experiences.[12] Nowhere else was this impact

[8] Voaden, "Mysticism and the Body," 2; Ronald Rafique Wayne Powell, "Mystical Traditions in the Great World Religions," n.d., 126; Libby, "The Historian and the Sexologist," 173.
[9] Voaden, "Mysticism and the Body," 2–3.
[10] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology of Dionysius of Areopagite*, trans. Saint John of the Cross (England: The Shrine of Wisdom, 1923), 11.
[11] Voaden, "Mysticism and the Body," 3.
[12] Ibid., 4.

more noticeable than in what Barbara Newman terms *la mystique courtoise*, the mystical discourse distinct to the beguines.[13]

While the beguines' mysticism is often discussed as a form of *brautmystik,* the bridal mysticism based on Bernard's allegorical reading of the Song of Songs, Newman argues that the singularity of the beguines' mysticism is lost when scholars limit their survey to *brautmystik* alone. Rather, she asserts that through *la mystique courtoise*, the beguines combined *brautmystik* and *fine amour*, blending both monastic and courtly genres of love discourse. Since *brautmystik* was a narrative crafted around a feminine self-insert persona, the beguines could have taken on the tradition rather easily. Instead, they infused it with courtly love narratives in which a male persona is desirous of a female character, allowing them to test the boundaries of gender.[14]

Marguerite Porete (d. 1310), for instance, developed a complex theology of the annihilation of the soul which allowed her transcend the boundaries of her gender though her use of apophatic language,[15] or the act of "unsaying" as Michael Sells explains.[16] In *The Mirror of Simple and Annihilated Souls and Those Who Remain Only in Will and Desire of Love,* Marguerite explores the soul's relationship with God through a dialogue between the Soul, Love, who advises the soul, and Reason, who acts as a counterweight to the propositions Love makes. Marguerite argues that to achieve ultimate union with the divine, the soul must be totally annihilated into the divine abyss, wherein the soul and God become so fully one that nothing of the individual soul remains.[17] On this annihilation, she wrote: "That which burns has no cold,

[13] Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 137.
[14] Ibid., 138.
[15] Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 5, https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/200/monograph/book/45399.
[16] Michael Sells, "The Pseudo-Woman and the Meister: 'Unsaying' and Essentialism," in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2001), 114.
[17] Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 104–9.

and the one who swims has no thirst. Thus such a Soul, says Love, is so enflamed in the furnace of the fire of Love that she has become properly fire, which is why she feels no fire. For she is fire in herself through the power of Love who transforms her into the fire of Love."[18] Thus, annihilation is the apophatic unsaying of her gender, for to be nothing is to be neither female nor male.

Marguerite's *The Mirror of Simple Souls* stands as one of the most impressive works of medieval Christian mysticism, such that its influence can even be seen in the works of Meister Eckhart.[19] Nevertheless, she and her work were deemed heretical by the Church, and she was arrested in 1308 in Paris, where she would eventually be burned at the stake in 1310. During her imprisonment, she continuously refused to explain herself to the inquisitors, even when she was offered absolution if she were to recant her work.[20] She remained steadfast in her conviction that her work was divinely inspired and was staunchly unapologetic of her authenticity. Moreover, as Bernard McGinn has argued, she showed no "hint of the conventional female apology for trespassing male terrain in writing about the highest things."[21] Indeed, it was for her transgressions that she was referred to by the authorities as *pseudo-mulier*, or "fake woman."[22] Despite her condemnation, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* continued to be read in its original vernacular of Old French and in later translations into Latin, English, and Italian throughout the Middle Ages.[23]

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[18] Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (New York : Paulist Press, 1993), 107, http://archive.org/details/mirrorofsimpleso0000pore.
[19] Bernard McGinn, ed., *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2001), 2.
[20] Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 21.
[21] Ibid., 3.
[22] Ibid., 5.
[23] McGinn, *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, 2.

Conclusion

The beguines demonstrate how the source of women's marginalization could also be the source of their liberation. They established for themselves autonomy through their spirituality, and their social and financial independence allowed them to live in communities with one another outside the bounds of male authority. They worked, preached, and gave back to their communities. Their embrace of mysticism allowed for the flourishing of a distinct form of mystical theology which further challenged the limits placed on femininity. Thus, the beguines offer modern women a portrait of resilience, authority, and authenticity in spite of the limitations placed on them by society.

Conclusion

Christianity, both as a faith and as a worldview, is ever-evolving. As the world's largest religion, it follows that there is a vast multitude of ways in which believers understand doctrine and the world around them as a result. This becomes an issue when the doctrine particular to one group is forced upon not just other Christians, but also those of differing faiths, or those with no faith at all. This is what the Christian Right is attempting to achieve in America currently; by institutionalizing a narrow and selective reading of theology and history, they are actively forcing an immense and diverse population into a rigid, uncompromising definition of morality and virtue. Supported by plain and literal interpretations of the Bible and surface-level readings of history, a mythic Christian utopia is made to seem as though it is just within reach. Society is viewed as corrupt because it has turned away from this virtuous ideal, and only once men are men, women are women, and the nation becomes godly again will everything be right in the world. Never mind that Neo-Nazis and insurrectionists take up the same cause or that scholarship warns of the rise in fascism and authoritarianism; taking away the freedoms and bodily autonomy of women and queer people will cure America's ills.

As the present study has demonstrated, this narrative is completely unsubstantiated by the data. There has never been version of Christianity where queer people never existed because queerness has always existed. There has never been a version of Christianity where the gender binary existed because gender has always existed on a spectrum. The distance between the current moment and the medieval past makes it easy to believe that categories of difference are a product of modernity and that all medieval people thought, behaved, and existed in exactly the same way. And yet, historical analysis shows that the Middle Ages and its inhabitants were no

less diverse, no less inquisitive of nature and what it meant to be human, and no less certain about the stability of gender. Gender nonconforming bodies were frequently associated with divinity, whether through the feminized Christ or through the *vitae* of trans saints. Men's construction of the mythical woman was often challenged by actual women, and through their spirituality, women could establish for themselves authority and autonomy. While Christianity could be the source of rigidity and oppression, it could also be the source of fluidity and alterity. Two things can be true at once.

At the time of this writing, the current events are continuously evolving. It seems that with each new day, the bills being introduced in state legislatures across the nation are becoming more and more extreme. This study is not naive enough to assume that it could change the heart of a politician; rather, it was conducted for those who find themselves in the crosshairs in the hope that they may see themselves in the history of those that seek to write them out of it. Queerness, transness, and femininity has always had a place in Christianity, no matter what they say.

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