



Conflicting Masculinities in Christianity: Experiences and Critical Reflections on Gender and Religion

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Any theology, including the academic, could be understood as situated knowledge (Donna Haraway). Indicating one's own perspective protects from exaggerated claims of objectivity: The quasi-divine "view from nowhere" is too close to the limited male gaze to be objective. Conversely, this "positioning is, therefore, the key practice in grounding knowledge" because it "implies responsibility for our enabling practices."¹

I write as a heterosexual married man and father of two children. As a German Catholic theologian, I am confronted with, or better, I am an implicated part of the entire eurocentric, androcentric, and homophobic history of power and violence in my church, which at the same time wants to be a place of salvation and liberation, nonetheless. My academic field is Practical Theology, which means locating and reinventing Christian traditions within the experience of present life.

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This text follows three steps. After some introductory remarks about religion and masculinity, I will lay out the conceptual basics for a critical analysis of masculinity in Religion and the Church. Secondly, I undertake a case study about clerical masculinity and the Synodal Path. And in a final step, I try to deconstruct the “Global church argument” within the Catholic church, as it prohibits necessary changes in the religious gender order by instrumentalizing the Global South. My argument will be that dissent between different forms of masculinities in church and theology could be a perspective of hope because it enables the transformation of closed clerical and patriarchal images of what men should be.

RELIGION AND MASCULINITY: TWO TOXIC CONCEPTS FOR THE DIVERSITY OF LIVING TOGETHER?

My point of view is rooted in eleven years of experience as a teacher in a Catholic School for Educators and Social Workers. By growing up, boys are confronted with the mostly implicit expectation of male dominance, strength, and superiority over other men and in contrast to women. Masculinity can therefore become a nightmare in the lives of boys and men. The bestseller “Mask off: Masculinity Redefined” by JJ Bola, a Kinshasa/Congo-born and London-raised activist, was translated into German as “Don’t be a man. Why Masculinity is a Nightmare for Boys.” He writes:

“Manhood, much like masculinity, is not a fixed identity. [...] It is ever changing, it is fluid, and more importantly, it is and can be anything you want it to be. However, as long as there remain rigid and stereotypical beliefs around masculinity that go unchallenged, men are often unable to subscribe to a masculinity that sits outside this status quo.”²

A quite similar experience comes from theological scholar Herbert Anderson. He told his students that he was going to move away for his wife, a second time in a row, as she had gotten a job in another city. “In response to this announcement, a young student blurted out, ‘You’re a wuss.’ It was a clear declaration that in his world view I did not embody hegemonic masculinity,”³ an analytic concept I will lay out below.

Further examples of conflicting masculinities can be observed around the world. I will stick to my own German context. After the conditions of life for men and women have become much more equalized in recent

decades, despite remaining inequalities, there is, at the same time, a transformation of the structures of law, values, and norms in society. This reveals a paradox of simultaneity of persistence and change.⁴ From 2000 to 2010, several qualitative-empirical studies on men documented the “persistence of the image held by both sexes of men as ‘strong, active, and rational’ and that of women as ‘sociable, emotional and erotic.’”⁵ Expectations of the church’s position concerning gender are also highly polarized: “31% of men and 24% of women desire the church’s commitment to traditional gender relations. Again, 31% of men and 22% of women want the church’s support in reshaping men’s roles.”⁶

Yet, minor changes in the law have sparked major debates about the symbolic and normative foundations of society. Since 2017, same-sex couples have legally been able to marry. Gays and lesbians are equal now before the law. And since 2018, it has been possible to put the category “diverse” on passports in addition to “male” and “female.” Everyday experience shows how women are conquering male domains in the labor market (police, military, health care); conversely, men are expected to take over domestic tasks traditionally performed by women (household, children, care responsibilities). Violent and aggressive behavior is no longer tolerated by men or women alike but is publicly condemned.⁷ A certain form of traditional masculinity, analyzed in research as hegemonic masculinity, is losing its unchallenged self-evidence. The #metoo movement is the visible symbol of these changes. However, when old ideals of masculinity “are called into doubt not only by one’s own wife, but by society as a whole, the result is an increased vulnerability and, correspondingly, an increased willingness to use violence,” says Susanne Kaiser in her book on the comeback of reactionary masculinity.⁸ For many white men today, the phrase holds true: “Because you were used to privilege, equality feels like oppression.”⁹

Critical researchers of masculinity point to the consequential problem that “criticism ‘against’ men could lead men to confuse the demand to [...] give up privileges with discrimination, and to feel like ‘victims of the victims.’”¹⁰ This assessment that “enough is enough with equality and emancipation” has given rise to movements which want to protect men’s rights and which are anti-feminist. Alongside Putin, Orbán, Trump, or Bolsonaro, the Magisterium of the Catholic Church also regularly defends the traditional family and gender model against criticism and crisis.

In the field of Christian churches, the narrative of threatened male identity correlates with a very particular paradox. On the one hand,

Christianity is considered a patriarchal and male-dominated religion. The Catholic clergy is exclusively male, which was also valid in German Protestantism until recently: pastors and pastoral workers had predominantly been men.¹¹

But when at the beginning of modernity religious practice was pushed back into the private sphere, “concerns arose that domestic and individual piety were ‘feminizing’ the church and therefore men were losing interest in church life.”¹² Subsequently, Christian men’s movements repeatedly attempted to counter the supposed “feminization of the life of faith” with religious remasculinization.

Linda Woodhead has explored these connections, saying: “Historically, Christianity always flourished when it supported a patriarchal gender order and its associated forms of masculinity and femininity [...]. But if the gender order begins to falter, a religion that sacralizes that order is likely to struggle as well.”¹³

Today, however, gender research makes visible the price of forcefully stabilizing binary gender stereotypes—this is also true for the realm of religion and the Church. Stabilizing male identities in their dominance without gender justice, without paying attention to the diversity of masculinities and one’s vulnerability, is, in JJ Bola’s words, “a kind of double-edged sword, a poisonous panacea; that is to say, the same system that puts men at an advantage in society is essentially the same system that limits them; inhibits their growth and eventually leads to their break down.”¹⁴ *Recognition and normalization of diversity rather than reproduction of toxic stereotypes of masculinity is therefore the position I would like to pursue—both theologically and pastorally.* That leads to the current academic approaches in the field of Men, Masculinity, and Religion.

CRITICAL MASCULINITY STUDIES IN RELIGION

“Hegemonic Masculinity”: The Classic Concept of Analysis

The groundbreaking approach by Raewyn Connell has inspired practice-theoretical and discourse-critical masculinity research worldwide.¹⁵

“Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting.”¹⁶

“Hegemonic masculinity” is to be understood as a non-essentialist perspective of analysis rather than a concept with stable characteristics. There is not one masculinity but a hegemonic model that excludes other masculinities.¹⁷

“At any given time, one form of masculinity is culturally singled out in contrast to the others. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as that configuration of gendered practice which ensures [...] the [...] dominance of men as well as the subordination of women. [...] Within this framework, there are [...] specific gender relations of dominance and subordination among groups of men. [...] Gay masculinity is the most conspicuous, but not the only form of subordinate masculinity.”¹⁸

Not all men embody “hegemonic masculinity” in its purest form, as public figures like male actors or the Avenger heroes do. But all share the *patriarchal dividend* of this social gender structure.

“The number of men who truly practice the hegemonic pattern rigorously and completely [...] may be quite small. Nevertheless, a vast majority of men benefits from the predominance of this form of masculinity, holding a share in the *patriarchal dividend*, the general advantage of men that derives from the oppression of women (and other, ‘weaker’ masculinities, M.S.).”¹⁹

Connell recently pointed out the complicated connection between Christian religion and hegemonic masculinity. Along with Mary Daly’s phrase “If God is male, then the male is God,”²⁰ Connell writes: “Familiar images of God rely specifically on constructions of hegemonic masculinity [...]. [...] Since hegemonic masculinities are based on the subordination of other masculinities, it is not surprising that patriarchal religions control the representation of masculinity.”²¹

This also means, that the leading binarity of “traditional vs. modern men” is undercomplex. Especially recent post- and decolonial research suggests a different view. Connell, referring to South African psychologist Kopano Ratele, writes, “traditional views of gender are diverse and constantly renegotiated. Certainly, some traditions are patriarchal, but there are also democratic and inclusive traditions. Thus, tradition also offers resources for gender equality. We should abandon the notion that the world is made up of ‘modern’ and ‘pre-modern’ cultures.”²²

Critical Masculinity Studies in Religion and Kenotic Masculinity

Björn Krondorfer, born in Germany, works in the field of “Critical Masculinity Studies in Religion” in the United States.²³ Critical masculinity studies begin by perceiving that hegemonic masculinity determines so self-evidently the measure of what is normal, that its influence often remains invisible. Men have no gender, so a common everyday belief goes, while gender remains a women’s topic. “Masculinity, as an unmarked experience, is an absence that needs our attention, and that is true for all world religions that follow patriarchal traditions.”²⁴

Masculinity consequently becomes a difficult category because according to Krondorfer, one must reckon with the “non-absence” of masculinely coded factors of influence: “Although the male body and male agency are always *in* the text (and *in* theology, *in* religious habits, *in* devotional practices, and *in* sacred institutions), they are not present as a consciously gendered experience. Non-absence signals that there is no awareness of that which is present but not consciously articulated.”²⁵ Forgetting and not addressing masculinities thus acts as a stabilization of conventionally dominant gender relations.

On the other hand, with thematizing men issues in a traditional way, one runs the risk of reproducing the heteronormative regime and once again ignoring women’s and queere experiences. This objection is important and guards against an overly naive perspective on the individual well-being of individual men.

Critical-reflexive masculinity studies “exhibits not only a reflective and empathic stance toward men as individual and communal beings, trying to make sense of their lives within the different demands put upon them by society and religion, but it must also engage these issues with critical sensitivity and scholarly discipline in the context of gender-unjust systems.”²⁶ In Pastoral Care, therefore, it can never be only about empowerment of men without at the same time honestly clarifying one’s own role and position in the lived gender relations. Otherwise, with Krondorfer, one again runs “the risk of reoccupying the gender discourse with masculine and patriarchal values.”²⁷ It is therefore always worth looking closely when talking about male identity, church, and religion. There is a great danger of simply stabilizing problematic stereotypes with rituals and religious narratives.

Krondorfer and Stephan Hunt summarize “critical masculinity studies in religion” in three aspects:

1. The approach understands men as people with gender identities. “With the help of gender theory, including feminist theory, men are seen within their particular gendered limitations and also their embodiments.”²⁸
2. The approach explores and analyzes the intersections of masculinities and religious traditions as they are handed down and lived. “What benefits, what harms are created when men remain blind to their own genderedness? What ideals, practices, and images of manliness are condoned or condemned in religious traditions?”²⁹
3. The approach follows a transformative perspective that seeks to discover alternatives to patriarchal structures and hegemonic masculinities.

The problem of many religious discourses of masculinity is an essentialist foundational structure. Moreover, this does not only describe the Catholic Church but also, for example, the more esoteric mythopoetic movement found in representatives from Robert Bly to Richard Rohr. Because men are in crisis, new and powerful images of men are needed, they say. Men would have to rediscover the warrior in themselves, their wildness and the desire to compete. A kind of renewal in masculinist ways is found today by Jordan Peterson or the antifeminist Men’s Rights Movement. But this again only reproduces androcentric, stereotypical patterns of a male role that defines itself in binary demarcation from the female.

Armin Kummer aptly writes about essentialist discourses of masculinity: “Defending male privileges, legitimized by myth and fairytales, contributes little to the liberation of men or human flourishing. Men won’t solve their social, psychological and ultimately spiritual problems by trying to deny or reverse the collapse of an unjust gender order.”³⁰ This is also true of the essentialist gender anthropology of the Catholic Magisterium with its polar gender complementarity. I agree with Kummer: “Rather than getting in touch with masculine archetypes, [...] gender stereotypes need to be deconstructed.”³¹ If, on the other hand, masculinity is understood not as a fixed identity role but as the dynamics developed in practices of what those who see themselves as men do and experience in various aspects of their lives, then the narrow stereotypes open up. This means not only deconstructing aspects that devalue women but also the self-destructive potential of heroic discourses of masculinity, “the pointless self-sacrifice of millions of young men in militarized masculinity.”³² It is horrible to see how the Russian War in Ukraine follows these patterns.

Krondorfer’s own attempt, therefore, argues for critical theological research on men as kenotic theology. Kenosis is the technical theological

term for God's coming into the world in weakness: God becomes human, dwells in this world, and lives our human life along with all weakness and cruel vulnerability until death. "He was human like you and me," says the Philippians hymn (Phil 2:7). Men could take this voluntary self-limitation as a model, becoming aware of their privileges in order to share them and enter into a new relationship with others. "Seen in this light, a kenotic theology is an attempt not to fall prey to the seduction of developing new normative discourses about and for man (and woman). Instead, it is about leaving behind the theological paradigms in which male models hold interpretive supremacy."³³

Why such a male-related gender perspective is quite useful for catholic theology today becomes clear when applied to the epochal rupture of clergy perpetrated sexual abuse.

CASE-STUDY CATHOLIC CHURCH: SEXUAL ABUSE, CLERICAL MASCULINITY AND SYNODAL PATH IN GERMANY

The Catholic Magisterium acknowledges only either women or men in sharp distinction. And it normatively defines for them what true manhood and true womanhood mean according to God's plan of creation. While the sacramental leadership is reserved only for men, and authority is thus tied to a male gender identity, "the irreplaceable role of women in all aspects of family and social life involving human relationships and caring for others. Here what John Paul II has termed the *genius of women* becomes very clear. It implies first of all, that women be significantly and actively present in the family" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004, no. 13).

While women are much praised by the Church, but not ordained,³⁴ young men are primarily targeted as potential priests. There is almost nothing to find in magisterial texts about ordinary men and their everyday problems.

The Catholic Church leadership thus sees itself committed to a normative gender anthropology, where on the surface equality is displayed, but underneath there is structurally inevitable discrimination: Those who do not fit themselves in the stereotypical gender containers of the church show "a confused concept of freedom in the realm of feelings and wants, or momentary desires provoked by emotional impulses and the will of the individual, as opposed to anything based on the truths of existence."³⁵

This applies to gays and lesbians, trans*people and queer lifestyles, and to all who stand in solidarity with them.

The Catholic gender order is defended in such an aggressive manner because it has become a decisive core belief of catholic identity politics. “The corporative structure of the church is [...] legally a gender hierarchy.”³⁶ “What would be discrimination in the state is valid in the church as a consequence of the magisterial gender anthropology [...]”.³⁷ But this problematic ecclesiastical line of argument (equal dignity, but not equal rights) is also held beyond the church: “Adherents of the belief in a ‘natural gender order’ modernize their concept by transforming the traditional understanding of dominance of men over women into an ‘equivalence of others.’ That way, they are able to maintain traditional gender arrangements without appearing patriarchal or sexist, even though they still are.”³⁸

In fact, this is becoming less and less justifiable, both socially as well as theologically. The sexual abuse of children and the spiritual and sexualized violence against adults, especially by male clergy, deprives this constellation of its legitimacy. An important step forward in the current analysis and processing of the events of abuse lies in a systemic perspective, as implemented by the MHG-Study (2018), an interdisciplinary large-scale research project on clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse in Germany.

“The results of the study make it clear that the abuse of minors by clerics of the Catholic Church is not only about the misconduct of individuals, but that attention must also be directed to the risk and structural characteristics specific to the Catholic Church, which enable sexual abuse of minors or make its prevention more difficult.”³⁹

The MHG-Study shows that the “rotten apple theory” does not apply. It is not about the pathological behavior of individuals from whom the church as an institutional space could distance itself. Rather one will have to question the conceptual identity of Catholicism itself.

This begins with a disturbing perception: empirically, abuse is a transideological phenomenon. Perpetrators exist on both the left and the right, in progressive and conservative milieus. The necessary change must come from the wounded reality, from the pain of those affected, not from ideology. Therefore, it is primarily a matter of making a professional distinction, which type of thought and culture have a preventive effect and which, conversely, possibly promote abuse, assault, and violence. For this reason, one cannot avoid the connection between sexuality and power

within the Catholic Church, one cannot avoid exaggerated sacralized understandings of ministry, and one cannot avoid the clericalistic esprit de corps into which many believers are socialized as a complementary, co-clerical role. And there is no avoiding the analysis of clerical masculinity.

As Theresia Heimerl, a scholar of religious studies, puts it, the “clerical man as a different sort of man has become a trademark of Catholic Christianity.”⁴⁰ But today, the question is: “Is clerical masculinity a particularly treacherous form of toxic masculinity that hides its inability to deal with new gender role models behind a hypocritical façade?”⁴¹ There are initial attempts, as by Julie Hanlon Rubio of the Jesuit College at Berkeley, to examine “how problematic conceptions of masculinity deform the relationships of celibates just as those of non-celibates.”⁴² She understands clergy sexual abuse in its inseparable connection to masculinity.

Rubio, like Heimerl, points to the gendered inconsistency of clerical masculinity. Priests, as men, by definition, exclusively represent the sacred, defined as masculine, in Jesus Christ and God the Father. At the same time, however, their everyday life can be read as predominantly female as for their abstinence from sexuality, their identity as pastoral Care-Givers, and their liturgical dress. Rubio asks: “Might clergy sexual abuse be an extreme way of enacting their masculinity from spaces of perceived powerlessness and spaces of excess entitlement?”⁴³

Another aspect that fosters the coverup is the often-diagnosed masculine nature of the clerical leadership as a kind of Men’s Union. “Just as networks enable men in entertainment, sports, and politics to protect male power and privilege while disadvantaging their female colleagues, clerical networks protect men who abuse both minors and adults.”⁴⁴ After the “breach of silence,” many accounts of experiences reveal very destructive effects in the Catholic connection between religion and masculinity. Rubio and Paul J. Schutz deepen that in their 2022 published research project “Beyond bad apples.” “In sum, the literature on sexual violence shows that while some individual pathologies are associated with men’s use of sexual violence, sexual violence is tied to broader social norms related to masculinity, which are in turn part of the structures of patriarchal power. This suggests that any serious effort understand and eliminate sexual violence in the Church requires attention to how sex, gender, and power are embedded in ecclesial structures.”⁴⁵

The Synodal Path of the German Catholic Church is discussing such questions in four thematic forums: Power and separation of powers in the

Church, priestly existence today, women in church ministries, sexuality and partnership. In terms of canon law, this is a non-binding consultative process that acquires ecclesiastical efficacy through the self-commitment of individual bishops. Nevertheless, the work on reforms is so intensive and broad that critical observers warn of a schism in the church. From this perspective, the good of the church and its unity would still take the first place over any other experiences.

I just want to briefly call attention to a text that three queer believers have brought to the Synodal Path, addressing precisely this level of experience. Queer people as believers inside the Catholic Church experience thousands of fine pinpricks: the catechism wanting to recognize homosexual people as persons, but forbidding them sexuality, insulting their identity as “rainbow plague” or as “homo lobby,” equating homosexuality with pedophilia, against all scientific knowledge, subtly devaluing their lifestyle in congregations.

“The Catholic Church is often not only not a shelter for us, but it is a place where we must expect our dignity and our humanity to be attacked at any time. [...] It is not we who have the burden of proof. [...] It is not lesbians, gays, trans and inter persons and their ways of living and loving that are sinful, but the way our church deals with them in many places.”⁴⁶

The brave German Campaign #OutInChurch⁴⁷ in 2022 had great public impact and is about to change the normative agency of Catholic church as well. But this is not merely a European problem.

DECADENCE AND DECAY? DECONSTRUCTING THE “GLOBAL CHURCH ARGUMENT” IN GENDER AND RELIGION

I follow up on Raewyn Connell’s point about the importance of a global, postcolonial perspective on gender and religion today.⁴⁸ In Catholic areas of Europe, an argument that fatally connects gender, religion, and the othering of the Global South can be heard again and again. It goes like this: Criticism of the male dominance of patriarchal religion demands for Gender-Equality in all church offices and acceptance of gender and sexual diversity—they are all devalued as luxury problems of the secular, western North. The traditionally deeply religious and conservatively backward Global South would never go along with this.

This line of argument is not only found among conservative bishops and theologians but also, for example, in the analysis of the Italian sociologist Marco Marzano. His book *The Immovable Church* he insinuates that “African and Asian Catholics would certainly not like to be part of an institution, that in other parts of the world recognizes the legitimacy of homosexuality or ordains women priests.”⁴⁹ In view of the Catholic Church’s competition with Pentecostal churches and other religions, Marzano argues that “African Catholicism would have to become more magical, more esoteric [...] it would have to emphasize precisely those features—homophobia, machismo, closeness to witchcraft—that are rather incompatible with secularization.”⁵⁰

There are binaries being constructed here that could not be more neo-colonial. The Global South associates itself with homophobia and machismo, with religion and witchcraft. The Global North, on the other hand, stands for the absence of religion and hedonism, but also for freedom and the rights of quality. In any case, to prevent a schism in the global church, everything must remain the same when it comes to sexuality and gender. And the South is saddled with much of the burden of justification.

A look at recent postcolonial research, however, reveals a quite different picture. Katja Benkel has summarized the state of the debate in a study on the rigid discourse of homosexuality, using Uganda as an example. Heteronormativity and rigid sexual morality “was [...] constitutive of ‘whiteness’ and legitimized those racist considerations of White Europeans within colonial discourse and naturalized the constellation of power inscribed therein.”⁵¹ And she adds: “The Christian mission in particular was devoted to sexual education in the face of amorality [...]. It propagated the bourgeois family ideal with fixed gender roles and placed sexuality in a discourse of morality and sin.”⁵²

Without colonial history as a backdrop, much would remain obscure here, as the disciplining of the body and sexuality by Christian Pastoral Care, as it has been analyzed by Foucault, played a decisive role in colonialism. Rebecca Habermas, in her study of German colonial rule in the Congo, writes:

“Also, the North German Mission, like the Steyl [missionaries], wanted to abolish the conventional division of labor that had given women a monopoly position in agriculture, since they considered female work outside the home as inappropriate.”⁵³

At the same time, the western ideal of masculinity was essentially shaped by military heroism, which was reinterpreted in the context of the Christian mission of the nineteenth century.

“Henceforth, it was considered heroic to convey the Gospel message of salvation in a peaceful manner. Such an understanding of masculine heroism was directly linked to the imperialist project, which saw itself as a pacification and civilization project, that sought to save the ‘barbarian’ and ‘pagan’ populations by spreading Christian values. Missionaries were the new heroes.”⁵⁴

The aim here is not to romanticize precolonial African traditions, which probably were not fundamentally more peaceful or less patriarchal. But researchers like Marc Epprecht show “how religions in the past explained and accommodated the fact of sexual diversity in spite of the general commandment toward heterosexual marriage and reproduction.”⁵⁵ Unlike the current polarizations on gender issues following “The homosexuality-is-un-African Myth,” Epprecht suggests, “Africans had many words, symbols and myths to explain and categorize such diversity, or simply to turn a blind eye to it.”⁵⁶ And he summarizes: “Many stereotypes of ‘African Sexuality’ are not only deeply misleading but also imply serious harms for public health, social justice and economic development,”⁵⁷ be it the oversexualization of nonwhite bodies, the catholic image of conservative religious believers, the victimization of female bodies or the neocolonial need of white men salvation.⁵⁸

But patriarchal misogyny⁵⁹ and masculinist populism can’t be outsourced neither in the Muslim World nor in the Global South.⁶⁰ As the comeback and persistence of reactionary masculinity in the West shows, any neocolonial Othering must fail here. It is about global lines of conflicts in intersecting Gender, Race, and Religion, but these present themselves in new and different ways, depending on regional context and political dynamics.⁶¹

Therefore, calling the commitment to gender justice and against patriarchal dominance and violence in church and society an eurocentric luxury problem seems quite cynical. Especially in the countries of the South, patriarchal attitudes propagating male dominance and tolerating male violence has existential effects on the life and body of women, children, and non-hegemonic men. Just think of the African discussions around HIV or gender-based violence.⁶² But the necessary global solidarity is complicated

because in each case concrete situations and circumstances must be considered, while colonial and orientalized stereotypes are still powerful.

However, churches and religious communities could strengthen those images of masculinity and gender that loosen the normative expectations of “the man” and “the woman,” that give space to the diversity of life instead of adding a few more bars to the cages of stereotypical behavioral expectations with reference to God.⁶³ This dispute runs obviously right across the globe and right through the worldwide Catholic Church.⁶⁴ The Indian Catholic Theologian Kochurani Abraham, for example, writes about the new ecumenical Indian Christian Women’s Movement (ICWM), which is “the emergence of new synodal practices from below.”⁶⁵ Even as India makes progress in gender justice, “the regressive traditions which persist in the grab of religion continue to have a say on Indian women’s psyche.”⁶⁶ But the movement “has enabled Christian women to join hands with prophetic courage for addressing justice concerns in the Churches and in society.”⁶⁷ Therefore, Abraham makes the contradictions and gendered power relations in church and society visible with a sharpness that is even more critical and progressive than what is discussed on the Synodal Path in Germany.

“For synodality to become the way of being Church, it is imperative to bridge the clergy-‘laity’ divide. [...] While religious power is vested in the hands of the clergy and the majority of the baptized remain ‘lay people’, the path of synodality is starting on a wrong premise that could impede the aspiration of becoming a synodal Church.”⁶⁸

The church’s leadership personnel must be chosen in democratic ways “irrespective of their gender or sexual orientation,” where “persons imbued with wisdom of the Spirit and the necessary leadership qualities are elected from the community of all the faithful and they will be accountable to the community for the responsibilities they shoulder.”⁶⁹

The worldwide awareness on intersectionality and here especially on the relationship between gender, race, and spiritual power in churches and religions makes it possible to see and deconstruct essentialist male dominance claims, even if they are beautifully and charmingly packaged in everyday life. Kochurani Abraham tells the story of an encounter with a Catholic theology professor in India.

“He spoke gloriously about women’s empowerment and asserted that it should begin in the family. In his opinion, women and men are like two wheels of a car that should move together to sustain the growth and well-being of the family. However, when he was asked as to who made decisions in his family, he replied without a second thought that the car needs a driver and God has entrusted him with that responsibility since he was the ‘head’ of the family. Further, he substantiated his position by citing many biblical texts that supported his argument about his ‘divinely ordained’ role as the head.”⁷⁰

This colleague internalized the Catholic gender dispositive that women and men had equal dignity but not equal rights. Based on this, Abraham develops a biting critique in the dispute over synodality. It is not enough to listen to everyone and let everyone speak, but to then leave the software of the operating system unchanged. Her question is, “who then is supposed to ‘listen,’ please. Even if Francis’ remarks on synodality declare everyone in the church to be the subject and thus the listener, calling the church ‘a single communal subject,’ the ecclesial system will continue to exist as it does now, with men at the helm and women and laity as the wheels, as long as the responsibility of listening remains in the hands of the male clerical hierarchy.”⁷¹

CONFLICTING MASCULINITIES AS A SIGN OF HOPE

Moving toward a more just and inclusive world will not be possible without transforming hegemonic masculinities. However, according to Herbert Anderson, “the challenge to fashion a new and more inclusive theological framework for masculinities is both essential and daunting.”⁷²

This stems from the fact that the field is characterized by polarization, but also diversity. Anderson points to the search for solutions to change men’s destructive behavior in the HIV crisis in sub-Saharan Africa.

“They agreed that patriarchy was the problem: They did not agree on the solution. Conservative African churches favoured reforming masculinity within a patriarchal framework (preserving notions like male headship and male responsibility), while African feminist theologians insisted on transforming masculinity beyond patriarchy.”⁷³

We have encountered this divide a few times before, for example, in the German men’s studies: one half expects improvement from stabilizing

traditional gender roles, the other half from overcoming them. In a new professional orientation framework for boys' and men's work, which is also important in church pastoral work, it says:

“The worldwide spread of the term ‘toxic masculinity’ makes it clear: Criticism of masculinity can no longer be regarded as a marginal phenomenon. However, the insisting forces are at least as numerous as those men who are looking for new and alternative ways of life.”⁷⁴

In this sense, conflicting masculinities in church and theology could be a perspective of hope for transformation of toxic masculinity within Christianity. It documents that hegemonic masculinity no longer goes unchallenged—not even within the Catholic Church.

NOTES

1. Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–599, 587.
2. JJ Bola, *Mask off. Masculinity Redefined* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 11.
3. Herbert Anderson, “A Theology for Reimagining Masculinities,” *Concilium* 56, no. 2 (2020): 25–36, 28.
4. Cf. Markus Theunert and Matthias Luterbach, *„Mann sein ...!?!“ Geschlechterreflektiert mit Jungen, Männern und Vätern arbeiten. Ein Orientierungsrahmen für Fachleute* (Weinheim Basel: Beltz Juventa, 2021), 42.
5. Rainer Volz, “Männliche Identitäten heute: Ergebnisse aus den ökumenischen Männerstudien,” in *Gender, Religion, Bildung. Beiträge zu einer Religionspädagogik der Vielfalt*, eds. Anabelle Pithan et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2009), 244–259, 252.
6. Volz, “Männliche Identitäten,” 253.
7. Cf. Susanne Kaiser, *Politische Männlichkeit: Wie Incels, Fundamentalisten und Autoritäre für das Patriarchat mobil machen* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2020), 106.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 38.
10. Theunert and Luterbach, *Mann sein*, 51.
11. Cf. Christoph Morgenthaler and David Kuratle, *Männerseelsorge: Impulse für eine gendersensible Beratungspraxis* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2015), 258.
12. Björn Krondorfer, “Kritisch-theologische Männerforschung,” *Lebendige Seelsorge* 66 (2015), 130–135, 130.

13. Linda Woodhead, *Geschlecht, Macht und religiöser Wandel in westlichen Gesellschaften* (Freiburg i. Br.—Basel—Wien: Herder, 2018), 76.
14. Bola, *Mask off*, 9.
15. See Daniel Gerster and Michael Krüggeler, eds., *God's Own Gender? Masculinities in World Religions* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2018).
16. Robert (Raewyn) W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–859, 836, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>.
17. "[T]he combination of the plurality of masculinities and the hierarchy of masculinities," which is "a pattern of hegemony, not a pattern of simple domination based on force" (ibid., 846) is crucial. With Gramsci, hegemony means a form of contested cultural dominance that does not require violence, or only symbolically visible violence, for its reproduction because individuals consider this dominance to be completely normal and justified.
18. Robert (Raewyn) W. Connell, *Der gemachte Mann: Konstruktion und Krise von Männlichkeiten* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006), 98, 99, 101.
19. Connell, *Der gemachte Mann*, 100.
20. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).
21. Raewyn Connell, "Männer, Männlichkeit, Gott: Kann die Sozialwissenschaft das theologische Problem klären helfen?," *Concilium* 56, no. 2 (2020): 105–115, 113.
22. Connell, "Männer," 110. See also Heidemarie Winkel and Angelika Poferl, eds., *Multiple Gender Cultures, Sociology, and Plural Modernities. Re-Reading Social Constructions of Gender across the Globe in a Decolonial Perspective* (London—New York: Routledge, 2021).
23. This approach seeks to "address the impact of gender and sexuality on religious belief and practice. ... In most religions, religious norms and men's experiences can hardly be distinguished from one another, which is why men are largely beneficiaries of religiously sanctioned hierarchies. It is the task of 'men's studies in religion' to make gender consciousness fruitful for the interpretation and analysis of the connections between 'religion' and 'man.'" (Krondorfer and Culbertson, as cited in Björn Krondorfer), "Theologische Horizonte des Mann-Seins. Gedankenanstöße," in *Gender, Religion, Bildung. Beiträge zu einer Religionspädagogik der Vielfalt*, eds. Annebelle Pithan et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2009), 229–235, 231.
24. Björn Krondorfer, "God's Hinder Parts and Masculinity's Troubled Fragmentations: Trajectories of Critical Men Studies in Religion" (2017), 5, https://www.uni-muenster.de/imperia/md/content/religion_und_moderne/preprints/crm_working_paper_14_krondorfer_neu.pdf. (reprinted in: Daniel Gerster and Michael Krüggeler, ed., "God's Own Gender? Masculinities in World Religions" (Würzburg: Ergon, 2018)).

25. Ibid., 5–6.
26. Ibid., 7.
27. Krondorfer, “Theologische Horizonte,” 232.
28. Björn Krondorfer and Stephen Hunt, “Introduction: Religion and Masculinities—Continuities and Changes,” *Religion and Gender* 2, no. 2 (2012): 194–206, 200.
29. Krondorfer and Hunt, “Introduction,” 200.
30. Armin Kummer, “Reforming pastoral care: Masculinity, male pathologies, and gender-specific pastoral care,” in *Reforming practical theology: The politics of body and space*, eds. Auli Vähäkangas et al. (Tübingen: 2019, online: <https://doi.org/10.25785/iapt.cs.v1i0.74>), 29–36, 34.
31. Ibid., 34–35.
32. Ibid., 33.
33. Krondorfer, “Theologische Horizonte,” 233.
34. A phrase often used by the canon law scholar Norbert Lüdecke/Bonn.
35. Congregation for the catholic education, “‘Male and female he created them’: Towards a path of dialogue on the question of gender theory in education” (2019), no. 19, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20190202_maschio-e-femmina_en.pdf.
36. Bernhard Sven Anuth, “Gottes Plan für Frau und Mann: Beobachtungen zur lehramtlichen Geschlechteranthropologie,” in *Gender studieren. Lernprozess in Theologie und Kirche*, ed. Margit Eckholt (Ostfildern: Grünewald, 2017), 171–188, 172.
37. Anuth, “Gottes Plan,” 172.
38. Theunert and Luterbach, *Mann sein*, 84.
39. Harald Dreßing et al., “Sexueller Missbrauch an Minderjährigen durch katholische Priester, Diakone und männliche Ordensangehörige im Bereich der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz. Projektbericht, Mannheim—Heidelberg—Gießen” (kurz: MHG-Studie) (2018), 15, https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/dossiers_2018/MHG-Studie-gesamt.pdf.
40. Teresia Heimerl, “Essentially Different Men? Varieties of Clerical Masculinity,” *Concilium* 56, no. 2 (2020): 109–117, 114.
41. Heimerl, “Essentially Different,” 115.
42. Julie Hanlon Rubio, “Masculinity and Sexual Abuse in the Church,” *Concilium* 56, no. 2 (2020): 118–127, 119.
43. Ibid., 122.
44. Ibid., 124.
45. Julie Hanlon Rubio and Paul J. Schutz, “Beyond ‘Bad Apples’. Understanding Clergy Perpetrated Sexual Abuse as a Structural Problem & Cultivating Strategies for Change,” Santa Clara 2022, 14, <https://www>.

scu.edu/media/ignatian-center/bannan/Beyond-Bad-Apples-8-2-FINAL.pdf.

46. Mirjam Gräve et al., *Die Bringschuld umkehren: Perspektiven queerer Menschen auf die Themen des Synodalen Wegs* (2021, not published), 4–5.
47. <https://outinchurch.de/>.
48. Cf. Connell, “Männer,” 110–111.
49. Marco Marzano, *Die unbewegliche Kirche: Franziskus und die verbinderte Revolution* (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2019), 121.
50. Marzano, *unbewegliche Kirche*, 122.
51. Katja Benkel, “‘Homosexuality is un-African’: Eine Analyse der Homosexualitätsdebatte in ugandischen Printmedien,” *Arbeitspapiere des Instituts für Ethnologie und Afrikastudien* 156 (2014), 11, https://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/files/2019/07/AP_156.pdf.
52. Benkel, “Homosexuality,” 12.
53. Rebekka Habermas, *Skandal in Togo: Ein Kapitel deutscher Kolonialherrschaft* (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 2016), 181.
54. Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie: Eine kritische Einführung* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015), 63. See also Habermas, “Skandal in Togo,” 184–185, 191.
55. Marc Epprecht, *Sexuality and social justice in Afrika: Rethinking homophobia and forgoing resistance* (London—New York: Zed Books, 2013), 108.
56. Epprecht, *Sexuality*, 108.
57. Marc Epprecht, “Gender and Sexuality,” in *Critical terms for the study of Africa*, ed. Gaurav Desai and Adeline Masquelier (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 127–144, 131.
58. Cf. Judith Gruber’s postcolonial deconstruction of Religion, Gender and Race, analyzing Theo van Gogh’s short video “submission” (2004), Judith Gruber, “Can Women in Interreligious Dialogue Speak? Production of In/Visibility at the Intersection of Religion, Gender and Race,” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 36, no. 1 (2020): 51–69, 59.
59. Cf. Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
60. Cf. Susan Abraham, “Masculinist Populism and Toxic Christianity in the United States,” *Concilium* 55, no. 2 (2019): 61–72.
61. Cf. on the example of feminism in Pakistan Ina Kerner, “Provinzialismus und Semi-Intersektionalität: Fallstricke des Feminismus in postkolonialen Zeiten,” *Feministische Studien* 38, no. 1 (2020): 76–93.
62. See Elisabet le Roux and Nadine Bowers-Du Toit, “Men and women in partnership: Mobilizing faith communities to address gender-based violence,” *Diaconia* 8 (2017): 23–37.

63. Religions, churches, and the reference to God are not harmless and not always inherently good just because they claim God as something good. The influence of church-represented and religiously validated orientations to patriarchal masculinity and cultural place-making for women and sexual minorities should not be underestimated. The dispute over the cultural interpretive sovereignty of religious life orientations on the subject of masculinity is a highly political arena of social conflict.
64. Cf. Ute Leimgruber, ed., *Catholic Women: Menschen aus aller Welt für eine gerechtere Kirche* (Würzburg: Echter, 2021).
65. Kochurani Abraham, “Synodality: Critical Questions and Gender Concerns from Asia,” *Concilium* 57, no. 2 (2021): 37–46, 42.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid., 43.
68. Ibid., 38.
69. Ibid., 42.
70. Ibid., 40–41.
71. Ibid.
72. Anderson, “Reimagining Masculinities,” 29.
73. Anderson, “Reimagining Masculinities,” 29.
74. Theunert and Luterbach, *Mann sein*, 50–51.

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