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Introduction

The Normative Power of Images: Religion, Gender, Visuality

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Abstract

In this introductory article to the special issue of *Religion and Gender* on gender, normativity and visuality, we establish the theoretical framework to discuss the influence of visual culture on gender norms. This introduction also provides a reflection on how these norms are communicated, reaffirmed and contested in religious contexts. We introduce the notion of visuality as individual and collective signifying practices, with a particular focus on how this regards gender norms. Two main ways in which religion, gender and normativity are negotiated in visual meaning making processes are outlined: on the one hand, the religious legitimation of gender norms and their communication and confirmation through visual material, and on the other hand, the challenge of these norms through the participation in visual culture by means of seeing and creating. These introductory reflections highlight the common concerns of the articles collected in this issue: the connection between the visualisation of gender roles within religious traditions and the influence of religious gender norms in other fields of (visual) culture.

Keywords

Gender; normativity; visual culture; image; Mary; religion and culture.

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Images shape our life in various ways. Mental images are a part of our selves, material images a basis of our memories and our relationship to past and present, media images influence our perception of the world and our place in it, religious images facilitate the relationship with transcendence and provide a vision of order for our world. In the contemporary era in particular, people are submerged in images and visual information: we live in a time when images are enormously widespread, not least through electronic information and communication technologies. However, as Michael Emmison and Philip Smith (2000: xi) remind us, humans have always lived in visual cultures and engaged with their world through vision. Maybe, in times when only a minority of the population was literate, people relied even more on visual information than today in order to navigate the world, to establish their identity and relate with others.

In a variety of fields, and using different approaches, the study of visuality and visual communication as a part of human ways of being and knowing has emerged over the last few decades.¹ The articles collected in this issue contribute to this effort from different disciplinary perspectives through their exploration of how visual media have been used in the context of religion to communicate and shape normative ideas about and the actual practice of gender identity, gender roles and the relationships between different gender categories. They also uncover ways in which visual culture has not only been a space where normative claims are reinforced, but also a site of subversion of these norms, a space of innovation and creativity.

But what exactly do these terms – visual, visuality, visual culture – mean? How do images and norms relate, especially in the context of religion? How can we analyse the relationship between gender and religion through visual media? In this introduction, we will approach these questions by highlighting two fundamental dimensions in dealing with religion, gender and visuality.

First, we will introduce a broad definition of images as individual and social practices. Understanding images as practices and in the context of practices, rather than as inert objects, allows perceiving more clearly their complex role in shaping identities and communities. Images are situated in networks of dynamic and unstable relationships among individuals and groups in which norms are communicated, solidified, but also contested. This leads, second, to a discussion of visuality as the field of individual and social signifying practices, in particular

¹ Margaret Miles (1996) offered a first introduction to the relationship between visuality, faith and values. For introductions to the field of visual studies and a selection of different approaches see for example Maar and Burda 2004; Morgan 2005; Malik, Rüpke and Wobbe 2007; Meyer 2009; Beinhauer-Köhler, Pezzoli-Olgiati and Valentin 2010; Henke, Spalinger and Zürcher 2012; Pezzoli-Olgiati 2012, Rose 2012.

with regard to gender norms. We will outline two main ways in which religion, gender and normativity are negotiated in visual meaning making processes: on the one hand, the religious legitimation of gender norms and their communication and confirmation through visual sources, and on the other hand, the challenge of these norms through the participation in visual culture by means of seeing and creating. We will use representations of the Virgin Mary and practices in the context of these images as examples for how legitimation of norms and resistance to norms occurs in and through visual practices, maybe even in the same image. These theoretical reflections and their application to a particular case provide the frame for the common concerns of the articles collected in this issue: the connection between the visualisation of gender roles within religious traditions and the influence of religious gender norms in other fields of (visual) culture. While this introductory article focuses on European and Christian traditions, which is the cultural and religious context we can competently discuss given our research focuses, the articles gathered in this special issue offer contributions to a broad range of religious traditions and socio-cultural contexts, thus providing a wide vision of how religion, gender and norms interact in diverse visual cultures.

Images as Practices

In the interaction between gender, normativity and religion, images play a crucial role. In visual communication in religious symbol systems, religious images represent a vision of the world that contains transcendent dimensions. Through their representations, and often also in their material presence, they claim the power to connect and affect the realm of the immanent and transcendent: the veneration of images and who/what they represent is believed to have an impact on the transcendent, whereas the sphere of the immanent is transformed through the miraculous power of images. Votive images are interesting examples of these mutual interactions between human beings and the divine through the visual (Pezzoli-Olgiati 2011). In the all-encompassing, powerful worldviews offered by religions, visual representations assume a strong normative character, shaping the ways in which humans perceive the world and interact in it. But as the papers collected in this volume also show, the normative and critical power of images is not limited to the sphere of the religious but also moves into other cultural spheres.

These dynamic processes of legitimation and challenge of norms – and thus of the ways of being and understanding of humans individually and as groups – are possible only because images are not simply objects one looks at in a detached manner, but instead are practices and situated in networks of practices: images *demand* from the viewer to relate to them (Mitchell 2004), either in an affirmative or a critical way, and even the decision to remain detached can be perceived as one way to engage in a (distanced) relationship with the image. Because these practices of looking and relating are necessarily subjective and dynamic, they are open to multiple significations and conflicting meaning making processes: they can, at the same time, communicate dominant norms and question them for an individual in his/her relationship to the image and the wider set of practices surrounding it.

What we mean by the notion of images as practices and their foundational role for the triangulation of gender, religion and normativity is well illustrated by visual representations of Mary and the practices surrounding them in the Christian tradition. Figure 1 shows a festival dedicated to the local statue of Mary in Iseo, a village on the southern slope of the Alps. The statue dates from the 17th century and ever since then it has been used in communal religious rituals which, next to public devotion, have served the main purpose – acknowledged or not – to perform and reiterate the general social order of the community, in particular the roles of men and women within the community (Pezzoli-Olgiati 2011). Mary provides a focal point for the representation and negotiation of gender roles, because her statue represents the Virgin in her twofold role as the humble, suffering mother of Jesus and the venerated, powerful mother of God. The statue in figure 1 is both a caring mother and the protectress of a rural community. Through her visual representations and their use in rituals, Mary, as the exemplar of patience, humility, chastity, obedience and self-abnegation, is affirmed as an ideal for all mothers and women with the goal to insert individual women through their identification with Mary in rigid, uncontested and unquestionable feminine roles as daughters, mothers, wives within families and communities. The negotiation and affirmation of this model of femininity in the practices surrounding representations of Mary make her, in a sense, the collective representation of ‘woman’, and thus the public celebration of Mary’s statue is also a way to re-affirm and re-perform feminine identity.



Figure 1: Procession with a statue of Mary, Iseo, Switzerland © Pezzoli-Olgiati, Neggio.

Interestingly, the other side of Mary, her role as mother of God and influential intercessor for humans with God, which is also visually represented in powerful images of Mary as the slayer of Satan or Queen of Heavens,² is not proposed as a model for human women, but is 'reserved' to this singular woman, Mary. The celebration of Mary in her ambiguous role as both humble mother and powerful protectress (see also Leisch-Kiesl 1991) thus enforces gender norms in two ways: it presents Marian qualities such as obedience and humility as exemplary for human women, and yet clearly puts women in their place by underlining that Mary's more powerful side is purely limited to this singular woman, the mother of Christ, but does not apply to other women. This example shows well that representations are not always unambiguous, but open to multiple interpretations which may then be adjusted to normative discourses through additional surrounding practices and discourses. Nevertheless, as we will see below, the ambiguity in visual (and conceptual) representations of Mary in many cases opens up a space for new ways to imagine and represent the Virgin in the context of renegotiation of gender roles.

As this brief interpretation of this statue of Mary and its integration into the communication of normative gender roles shows, it is important to conceive of images as dynamic communication processes: images are not static objects, but rather crystallisation points of practices of looking and imagining. They communicate on multiple levels within a community and in an individual member of the community. Specific material images always refer to a variety of mental images that are more or less shared within a collective. Thus on the one hand, the statue of figure 1 is a particular, unique sculpture one may look at in the church dedicated to Saint Mary in Iseo, Switzerland. On the other hand, the statue associates theological conceptions of Mary, the Holy Family, nativity narratives, an articulated canon of prayers, songs and practices or personal, everyday religious practice. Thus the statue is not simply a representation of Mary, but refers to a complicated network of other images, practices, concepts, collective and personal imaginaries of Mary. Worshippers looking at this statue in the church or during the yearly ritual activate parts of this network of references as they engage in a practice of interpretation. As our discussion of this example shows, the material and immaterial dimensions of these processes requires a combination of different approaches that move from the descriptive and sociological that takes into account the wider context as well as the situation of the individual in it to the hermeneutical and back again, integrating theory with practice, observation with interpretation.

Another form of communication occurs when in the process of looking at the statue the material body of this particular representation of Mary and the gendered body of the believer interact. The encounter of these bodies in a concrete place and time – the gaze connecting the body of the image with the body of the worshipper – is a fundamental aspect of visual communication (Belting 2001: 11–55). Furthermore, in this intimate encounter between statue and believer, another body is integrated: the body of the community. In religious contexts, the gaze has always an individual and a collective dimension

² For example, Filippo Lippi, *Coronation of the Virgin* (ca. 1444, Uffizi, Florence); Giovanni Pagani da Monterrubiano, *Our Lady of Succor* (1506, Musée du Petit Palais, Avignon).

(Asamoah-Gyadu 2008; Morgan 2005: 54), since it activates mental, shared images and concepts that are regulated on a social level, and responds to social expectations and norms regarding the position of the subject of the gaze and attitudes towards what is seen. The practice of looking at Mary is always embedded in a context where social norms, values and worldviews define the position, role and function of the individual viewer. Gender identity and communal belonging are critical aspects of such processes of visual communication because they shape the viewing positions of individuals and how they see themselves in relation to what they see;³ for women looking at Mary this means to be caught in the ambiguous position of both recognising themselves in the statue and being reminded of the infinite difference between themselves and the Virgin Mother.

Visuality as Social Practices of Meaning Making

Gillian Rose (2012: 2) takes account of the individual and collective dimension of seeing in her distinction between vision, the individual's physiological capacity to see, and *visuality* or *scopic regime*, which refers to the ways in which vision is socially shaped: seeing is not a universal of human existence simply because humans have eyes and can see. Apart from the fact that persons with seeing impairments have to seek different ways of navigating the world, how we evaluate the visual information our brain receives, what is considered worth seeing and how we are affected by what we see, is culturally constructed. Furthermore, vision and *visuality* are a part of a broader visual culture, which consists not just of artifacts or objects that can be seen, but includes also invisible elements, such as

attitudes, conceptual schemata, emotion, social dynamics, institutions. In addition to images, [visual culture] is ways of seeing as well as the practices that deploy images. The study of visual culture is not just about pictures, but also powerful forms of embodiment, that is, the gendered, sexual, racial, ethnic, sensuous characteristics of perception and feeling that constitute primary forms of organizing human values. The study of visual culture seeks to understand how people put their worlds together by practices of seeing and how they keep them in working order (Morgan 2012: 31).

Thus while seeing is first of all, physiologically speaking, an individual practice, associated with an individual body and representative of that person's physical as well as metaphorical point of view, it also has important social and cultural dimensions, in different senses: individual ways of seeing are embedded and shaped by cultural assumptions and conventions; seeing contributes to collective ways of understanding and meaning making; and seeing establishes and maintains social relationships (Morgan 2012: 3–5). Jon Wagner (2011: 72) underlines therefore that '[p]ropositions about the relationship of culture, materiality, and visibility implicate ideas about how people live, what they care about,

³ For a discussion of gender and *visuality* and the politics of representation, see Evans 2015.

who they are, what they see, and how they look.' And, one might add, what they believe in.

An individual's belonging in a particular visual culture is established through different ways of looking: 'In the first instance, one bears certain characteristics of appearance – style of dress, accoutrements, behaviour, gesture, colour of skin. In the second instance, one regards others and the world about one with a characteristic look. In the first sense one is seen; in the second one does the looking' (Morgan 2012: 5–6). While social modes of looking are maybe more subtle and less conscious than one's experience of being looked at (approvingly or disapprovingly), both gazes have a profound impact on one's sense of belonging.

The collective dimension of visual communication, both in how one looks and how one is looked at, is the necessary condition for the transmission, legitimation, negotiation and subversion of values and norms. But in order to grasp the normative dimension of visual practices it is essential to consider the specific logic of visual communicative practices as distinct from the logic of language and text:

Images do not represent a closed realm. However, their culture lives from the fact that images maintain their inherent strangeness, their dense silence and their visual abundance in opposition to the incessant murmur of discourses and the noise of debates. Beyond language, there are vast spaces of meaning, unimagined spaces of visuality, sound, gesture, mimics and movement. They do not need any amendment or retrospective justification through the word. Because the logos is not only predication, verbality and language. Its radius is significantly broader. It is necessary to cultivate it. (Boehm 2004: 43)⁴

The peculiar logic of images unfolds in the tension between the image and the imagination that arises in the activity of looking. In this 'iconic difference' visual meaning is generated through the gaze. In the act of seeing two different realities merge: the material reality of the image and the reality of the imaginary⁵ that the image activates (Boehm 2004: 39–43).

Bredenkamp also emphasises the peculiar meaning making processes of visual communication and the significance of the gaze and defines this dynamic process as an 'image act' occurring in the encounter between image and viewer(s):

Reciprocally to the speech act, the issue of the image act is grounded in the question which power enables the image when it is seen or touched to leap from latency into the agency of feeling, thinking and acting. In this sense, the image act is understood as the effect on sensing, thinking and acting that arises from

⁴ 'Die Bilder repräsentieren kein abgeschlossenes Reich. Aber ihre Kultur lebt davon, dass sie die ihr innewohnende Fremdheit, ihr dichtes Schweigen und ihre anschauliche Fülle gegenüber dem fortwährenden Gemurmel der Diskurse und dem Lärm der Debatten behaupten. Jenseits der Sprache existieren gewaltige Räume von Sinn, ungeahnte Räume der Visualität, des Klanges, der Geste, der Mimik und der Bewegung. Sie benötigen keine Nachbesserung oder nachträglichen Rechtfertigung durch das Wort. Der Logos ist eben nicht nur Prädikation, die Verbalität und Sprache. Sein Umkreis ist bedeutend weiter. Es gilt ihn zu kultivieren' (our translation).

⁵ About the significance of this concept in the study of religion see Pezzoli-Olgiati 2015.

the power of the image and the interaction with its looking, touching or listening counterpart. (Bredenkamp 2013: 52)⁶

To think of the image as a signifying practice also reminds us that the gaze, as Belting (2001) also underlined, is not an abstract concept, but – individually or socially – embodied and connected to the other senses through which we perceive the world, as well as emotional and cognitive ways of meaning making: Bredenkamp names feeling, thinking, touching and listening as fundamental dimensions of perception. Contrary to a long cultural tradition that understands looking as a disembodied, objective, quasi-mechanical activity, it is important to remember that the image act is always an embodied practice: it is concrete, personal and intimate and thus leaves traces in the bodies – and the lives – of those who interact, the image as well as the viewers (Morgan 2012: 7; see also Knauss 2008). Visual studies today face the challenge of rediscovering the embodiment of vision and integrating vision into the complex, synaesthetic perception of the world, working with visual material in a multisensory approach (Pink 2011).

Conceiving of visual communication as a practice involving the image, its individual viewers and individual and social imaginaries allows to conceptually link the activity of seeing with the regulatory practices of institutions and thus provides the theoretical basis to investigate the normative dimension of images, their normative power over gender identities and roles, in religious contexts.

Gender Normativity in Visual Communication

As we have seen, the study of visuality comprises a broad field, including not just images or representations, but also objects and people, what is looked at as well as who is looking and the practice of looking itself, the values that guide our ways of looking and the communities with which we interact through visual media and our gazes – and even what is not visible at all. Conceiving of visuality as communicative meaning making practice allows studying the processes of regulation occurring in visual practice in more or less obvious ways. The normative power of the visual moulds worldviews (Emmison and Smith 2000: 63) that characterise a given culture. Since vision and visuality appears so ‘natural’ (we simply ‘see’ what is out there), the norms that are communicated through visual culture are often not even consciously perceived, but unconsciously perpetuated through practices of seeing and showing.

Drawing on the *circuit of culture* (Du Gay et al. 1997), it is possible to analyse normativity and visuality on different levels: values and norms shape visual *representations* (the what and how of representation, for example the choice to represent Mary with downcast eyes rather than looking back at the viewer) and *reception* processes, such as the integration of the statue of Mary in

⁶ ‘Reziprok zum Sprechakt liegt die Problemstellung des Bildakts darin, welche Kraft das Bild dazu befähigt, bei der Betrachtung oder Berührung aus der Latenz in die Außenwirkung des Fühlens, Denkens und Handelns zu springen. Im Sinne dieser Frage soll unter dem Bildakt eine Wirkung auf das Empfinden, Denken, Handeln verstanden werden, die aus der Kraft des Bildes und der Wechselwirkung mit dem betrachtenden, berührenden und auch hörenden Gegenüber entsteht’ (our translation).

performances of religious communal order, as discussed above. Norms also regulate the *production* of visual and material objects (who is allowed to produce what kind of visual objects, for example the production of embroidery was considered acceptable for women, but not their contribution to the large frescoes of Renaissance churches), their *distribution* (for example, the use of visual materials for public or private consumption) and the processes of *identity* formation occurring through the interaction with visual materials (again drawing on the example of Mary, the ambiguous identification of female viewers with Mary's feminine identity as mother, but not as Queen of Heaven).

Normativity can be considered as 'a property by virtue of which a proposition or set of propositions recommend or demand that something is being done or abstained from, praised or blamed, believed or denied, pursued or rejected' (Schmidt 2011: 37). Normativity is a question of the justification, truth and authority of claims which is debated in ethics, epistemology and theology (Schmidt 2011: 37), and also, as this issue shows, in the realm of visual culture. Normative worldviews structure how we perceive the world and interact with it (Jansen and Oestmann 2011: vii), but because they often appear self-evident and 'natural', we are not necessarily always aware of their structuring power. Schmidt (2011: 38) makes a helpful distinction between implicit and explicit normativities, which can also be discovered in visual practices: for example the implicit, tacit social norm that leads western viewers to 'read' an image from left to right, top down with the presumption that important information will be situated in the top left without even being aware of the fact that this is how images are norm-ally read in this context, or the explicit norm 'do not touch' that prohibits viewers from experiencing images through their sense of touch with its claim that vision is a superior mode of perception than touch in most museums. Schmidt underlines that while tacit normativities might appear self-evident, this isn't necessarily the case – in fact, there may not be any rational basis for them –, and it is the task of civil society as well as academic research in ethics, law, theology, the study of religions and other disciplines to question their claims.

Normative frames aim at providing a timeless, true and reliable system without contradictions and thus play an important structuring role for individuals and societies. Religious norms in particular claim transcendent, absolute authority and immutability because of their divine origin. And yet like all norms, religious norms are part of traditions and therefore historical: they are established in a given context through complex processes of transmission, reiteration and innovation (Auerochs 2004; Jansen and Oestmann 2011). Thus it is important, especially in the analysis of religious gender norms, to keep in mind that in contrast to common sense perceptions of norms as stable and unchangeable, norms have a history and normativity is a dynamic process. This becomes particularly obvious when considering norms and processes of normativity through visual culture. Furthermore, a society or religious community might be shaped by several normative systems that govern different spheres, such as private and public, or political and economic, and might even contradict each other.

The differences, roles and expectations linked to gender categories are substantial aspects of secular and religious normative worldviews and visions of human coexistence, they shape the ways in which this world and its human inhabitants are perceived, and how individuals find their place and role within

that world, having at the same time an individual and social relevance. Thus in western culture, the presumption of a binary gender system in spite of the presence of a much more diverse reality of gender identities profoundly impacts how people perceive the world in binary patterns and thus shapes ways of being, identifying and knowing in all spheres of life (and even, for believers, of the afterlife). Nevertheless, this binary system is also challenged in numerous ways, be it by the presence of women religious who refuse to fulfil their role as wives and mothers or the establishment of communities of equals (with regard to gender) in ossuaries, as Anna Höpflinger's article in this collection shows.

The study of normative discourses in religious systems is further complicated by the fact that norms and worldviews are communicated in a broad range of media, such as texts – a particularly relevant medium, as the contributions to this issue show – images, material objects, music and sound, body and clothing, architecture and the regulation of space, and food. Normative discourses occur on all these levels and in all these spheres, but depending on medium or genre, they will be communicated differently and have different meanings: a passage of Catholic canon law (canon 968) that limits the ordination as Catholic priests to men makes an unequivocal normative claim, whereas a representation of Mary wearing priestly vestments⁷ offers a wider range of ambiguous interpretations of the relationship between gender and priesthood. Also, it is important to keep in mind that the normative system of religious traditions is not homogenous: dominant explicit and implicit normative discourses occur next to processes of reformulation of or resistance to these norms, as we will show in more detail in our return to the example of Mary below. Consequently, if the visual is used to reflect and reinforce norms and the power structures which they support, at the same time, it can also be a space for resistance against these structures, which is opened up precisely by the simultaneously individual and collective dimension of visuality as a practice: the multiple relationships within visuality between individual and collective, seeing and being seen, objects and practices open up gaps and fissures which can be filled with new meaning and be used to shift – slightly or radically – the normative meanings intended in these relationships.

In order to illustrate the possibility of subversive visual practices, let us return to our earlier example of representations of the Virgin Mary. As we said earlier, her images have been used not only as expressions of personal Marian devotion, but also to establish and reinforce social and religious norms of femininity as obedient, humble and caring. A widespread iconographic motif in the history of Christianity used to represent Mary in this role is the *Maria lactans* which shows Mary breastfeeding Jesus (figure 2).

This motif represents Mary as the caring, nurturing mother, a normative model of femininity to all human women who are asked to find their fulfilment in motherhood and the care for their children.⁸ In a theological-symbolic interpretation, Mary's milk can also be paralleled with Christ's saving blood, nurturing and saving the faithful, thus the reference to Christ's death on the

⁷ For example School of Amiens, *Le sacerdoce de la Vierge* (early 15th century, Louvre, Paris).

⁸ A good illustration for this dominant interpretation can be found in official documents of the Catholic Church, such as John Paul II 1988 and Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004.



Figure 2: Hand-coloured woodcut with silver in the halos depicting *Maria lactans* holding a crucifix, with Eve, apple and snake, 1450–1460 © Kupferstichkabinett. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Inv. 149–1.

cross in figure 2. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, when this kind of representation was particularly frequent, the normative reading of this image was to understand Mary's naked breast as an expression of her nurturing care for both her son, Jesus, and the faithful (Walker Bynum 1992). Yet it does not take open rebellion, but simply a subtle shift in the reading of this motif, to subvert the norms that are proposed by it when the image is seen as a visualisation of the sexuality of the Virgin's body. Then this practice of reading the visual becomes an act of resistance against normative discourses that use Mary as a model of asexual womanhood. Of course, there is no evidence from the Middle Ages that people actually saw a sexual aspect in this motif, but neither is there clear evidence that they did not. After all, the erotic value of female breasts in addition to their nurturing function was a part of, and continuous source of preoccupation for, medieval culture (Harrison Caviness 2001: ch. 2). In today's culture, the association of the breast with sexuality is probably even more immediate for most viewers used to eroticised representations of naked women in advertising, film and other media (Greco 2015), whereas the nurturing function of breasts might have receded somewhat in the background. Thus, the same *Maria lactans*, as a material image and more in general as an iconographic motif, can be used to challenge the normative image of womanhood personified by Mary and to imagine different ways of being woman and being Mary.

In contemporary art, the subtle challenge of normative messages in visual culture implicit in the polyvalent signification of representations becomes more

obvious in images that explicitly critique and subversively appropriate normative discourses of femininity expressed through representations of Mary. Cindy Sherman's *Untitled #216* (1989) represents a particularly strong case. In this photograph, the artist draws on Jean Fouquet's use of the *Maria lactans* motif in his *Madonna de Melun* (ca. 1450) and stages a remake of this painting with herself as Mary, using a breast prosthesis to draw attention to the multiple associations connected with the *Maria lactans* motif and the female breast (figure 3).

Without changing much in comparison to the original painting of Mary, this photograph clearly challenges the normative discourses that are generated (not only, but also) by looking at representations of the Virgin Mary as an ideal of femininity and motherhood. Even if the breast is not so much more prominent than in Fouquet's painting, it has a great visual impact: it does not have the nurturing quality of a natural breast, and, as an obvious fake, it loses its erotic connotations. In *Untitled #216* Mary's body raises questions about embodiment, sexuality and nourishment. The bodily, sexual model that Mary as a virgin mother represents for human mothers is extremely complicated because they are by necessity placed in an inferior position in comparison to the Virgin: after all, they are all tainted by the stain of sin because they conceived their children through the sexual act. Challenging the Catholic tradition that affirmed Mary's perpetual virginity and thus in a way disembodied her, in her photo, Sherman points towards the material fact of Mary's embodiment. The photo does not take a stance on Mary's virginity, but emphasises that she was a woman with a body, she nourished her son with her body, she might have experienced bodily



Figure 3: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #216*, 1989.

pleasure in feeding him and she certainly experienced bodily pain when she gave birth and when she saw her son die. Precisely because Sherman chooses to introduce a foreign object onto Mary's body, she underlines the proximity between Mary and human women in their contested bodiliness and sexuality without dissolving the ambiguity of the twofold significance of the female breast as nurturing and erotic. Her photo points towards the related issues of femininity, embodiment and sexuality and the fact that female embodiment represents a problem for Christianity and other cultures that has not been resolved for contemporary society either, as recent debates about breastfeeding in public affirm (Vuola 2013). Thus Sherman does not introduce new norms governing women's bodies and identities, but underlines that the traditional norms that require sexual modesty and limit sexuality to motherhood need to be reconsidered.

Sherman's photo is not only an example for how gender norms can be challenged through visual practices, but also for the two modes in which gender, religion and normativity interact in visual culture: first, she draws on and subverts Christian norms of femininity, and thus her image can be seen as an example for communicative practices occurring within the sphere of a religious tradition. But this is not all. Because, second, the artist actualises a traditional motif and at the same time moves it beyond the boundaries of a religious institution to the 'secular' context of contemporary culture: Cindy Sherman is not a 'religious' artist, her works are neither intended for a religious context nor as expressions of religious devotion, although she might draw on religious motifs. Her photos, such as *Untitled #216*, are exhibited in galleries and museums where people with different religious backgrounds or none at all encounter them. Sherman's Mary maintains its connections to the Christian tradition (it is clearly recognisable as a *Maria lactans* motif in the context of western art) and at the same time separates itself from this tradition. Thus the photo is an example for how religious gender norms as they are communicated through visual forms are present in wider cultural contexts and influence identities and worldviews in various ways.

The articles gathered in this issue of *Religion and Gender* develop in more detail these two facets of the normative power of images in the interaction of gender and religion, further expanding the approaches to the visual already introduced here in our discussion of theoretical frameworks in which to study the visual and the interpretation of the normative and critical power of various representations of Mary. The studies are embedded in different religious contexts and cultures, they use different theoretical approaches to gender and religion, and are written from the perspectives of different disciplines. Furthermore, they draw on different visual practices and materials, from miniature painting to film, clothing and textiles, skulls and bones, and dolls. Together, they make a strong point about the relevance of visual and material culture for the study of gender normativity in religious contexts by unfolding a broad range of possibilities how gender norms are negotiated.

Visual Normativity in Religious Traditions

The first three articles focus on how gender norms are communicated by means of material and visual practices within religious traditions.

Anna-Katharina Höpflinger's contribution, *Gender Equality in Death? The Normative Dimension of Roman Catholic Ossuary Chapels*, interrelates gender identity and normativity, visual practices and the construction of space. In her case study of the collection and organisation of bones and skulls in ossuary chapels, Höpflinger focuses on the representation of gender on the edge between life and death, analysing the ways in which gender shapes practices surrounding death, forms of life in view of death, and the identities of the dead. She suggests a typology of three ways in which visuality and normativity interrelate with regard to gender in this context: first, visual practices mirror current socio-religious gender norms whose claims extend not only to the living, but also to the dead; second, practices surrounding death establish gender norms as ideals for the living; and third, visual and material practices question socio-cultural norms for example by erasing differences based on gender identity, and inscribing 'different' differences, now based on spiritual advancement or ethical merit.

Doris R. Jakobsh's *Seeking the Image of the 'Unmarked' Sikh Women: Texts, Sacred Stiches, Turban* focuses on how Sikh identity is expressed visually and materially. Jakobsh analyses texts that explicitly prescribe different ways for men and women to express their Sikh identity, traditional forms of establishing feminine forms of religious agency and identity through embroidery, and a contemporary example of the subversion of traditional norms, namely the recent appropriation of the turban by diaspora Sikh women as a visual identity marker previously limited to male Sikhs. The practice of donning the turban is not just a challenge to religious gender norms, but also changes the meaning of this visual sign within the community. Jakobsh's article shows how texts and visuality interact, affirming and challenging each other, and thus underlines that the study of visuality needs to include text analysis. She also shows two ways in which dominant explicit gender norms are questioned: on the one hand, the tradition of embroidery represents an alternative normative system of female identity and agency in complex relationship with the dominant one, and on the other hand, the act of donning the turban represents an explicit rebellion against the dominant normative system through the use of a visual practice.

Nadia Cattoni also shows how texts and images interrelate in her contribution, *The Figure of Radha in Miniature Paintings: From the Pastoral to the Courtly, from Text to Visuality, from Polyphony to Normativity*. Her analysis of representations of the female figure Radha, Krishna's lover, shows how the ambiguities of this figure – imagined as both exemplary devotee of Krishna and his lover, that is with an erotic and a religious significance – are used to create the possibility for multiple readings. Her study traces the increasing separation of the image from the text, with the accompanying emphasis on the emotional impact through visual representation and also an increasing depersonalisation and formalisation of Radha's depiction. The iconographic tradition leads to a normalisation of modes of representation which implies a one-sided development of the figure of Radha (and the feminine identity she represents): it is no longer possible for a woman to be both an erotic figure and an exemplary religious devotee, but these two aspects of Radha are separated into an either/or of her identity. Cattoni's contribution underlines that to focus on visuality does not mean to neglect texts in the analysis of gender normativity in religions, but instead invites us to broaden our perspective in the analysis of the ways in which texts, images and practices tie together in the creation and legitimisation

of normative claims, where they contradict each other and how they can be sources of critique and transformation.

These articles highlight several significant aspects in the communication of gender normativity through visual practices: their intermedial dimension, the role of visual and material practices, the ambivalent balance between reiteration and innovation, between explicit norms and tacit assumptions, between dominant discourses of power and the subversive critique of naturalised paradigms. They also show the complexity of religious systems in which multiple, even contradictory normative discourses might be present at the same time and that are not always well defined but have blurry boundaries and interact intensely with other spheres of society and culture.

Religious Normativity in Visual Culture

The second part of this issue focuses more specifically on the interaction between different normative discourses within religious institutions and the diffusion of religious norms and values in the broader sphere of culture.

Maya Balakirsky Katz's article, *Dressing Up: Religion and Ethnicity in Israeli National Dolls*, shows how visual strategies to communicate norms related to gender and ethnic identity are deeply rooted in the practice of the production of material objects, in her case Israeli national dolls. Tracing the history of the production of national dolls in Israel, she underlines how gender, religious and national identity are closely connected in the types of dolls produced, such as the female secular Middle Eastern type or the male religious Eastern European type. Glancing beyond the negotiation of national self-identity in Israel at the perception of Israeli identity by others in the Disney vision of Israel in the ride 'It's a Small World', Balakirsky Katz shows that the Eastern European religious type with its associated gender norms (such as segregation of genders in public, dress codes and so on), which originally was only one type in a diverse vision of Israel as a nation has come to dominate the perception of Israeli identity abroad. In this particular case the reiteration of religious regulations is not related to personal beliefs or practices, but rather to a political, national agenda and thus shows how religious norms travel beyond their primary sphere into broader culture precisely because of their expression through visuality.

The last contribution in this issue moves to a different sphere of visual culture, namely Nordic film. In *The Gendering of Pastors in Contemporary Nordic Films: Norms, Conventions, and Contemporary Views*, Sofia Sjö analyses the representation of pastors, as 'religious specialists' themselves exemplary figures in the Christian tradition, in six films and the gender norms that are communicated through these representations. She traces visual and narrative conventions and their connection to gender, for example the generally positive representation of female pastors and the more critical association of male pastors with a traditional, rule-based form of religion, but also points out the moments in which these tendencies are disrupted to offer a complex view of religious gender norms in these films. Her article thus shows again that discussions of gender norms in religious contexts need to take into account the heterogeneity of these traditions, which is further increased when they intersect

with other social discourses: Sjö argues that these fictional images of pastors in films are a part of the mediatisation of religion that challenges gender norms and the role of dominant religious institutions in the Nordic context. Through connecting film images with broader social developments regarding religion in the Nordic countries, Sjö underlines that the analysis of visuality needs to take context into account in order to understand the ways in which images affirm or contradict normative discourses.

With their case studies, these two articles provide examples for how gender norms that have had their origins in specific religio-cultural traditions – Judaism and Christianity – have moved into plural societies in which these traditions can no longer claim absolute authority. Therefore, the norms they represent have to be defended or adapted in complex processes of the renegotiation of normative claims. These renegotiation processes occur prominently in the visual sphere, be it through widely distributed films or dolls in Disney Parks. As the articles show it is highly important in contemporary plural societies to be able to 'read' these visual practices and understand the ways in which they shape perceptions and attitudes of self and others.

In conclusion, we would like to thank the authors of the articles collected here for their contributions to the discussion on the normative power of images in religious contexts, and the editors of this journal for providing the space for us to analyse and question through these texts and images the ways in which visual practices communicate gender norms and how they can be resisted in religious traditions and plural cultures.

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