

## **Church and gender in historical context.**

### **Sister Jakoba talks about her research on gender and theology**

Thea Fabian:

How is it that gender roles have come to be so firmly ensconced in our minds? Like if you go out and ask people in the street what they think is typically feminine or typically masculine? The answers are always the same. Why is that?

Today's topic will be familiar, but you may well be surprised at who is sitting across from me for our conversation. So what is a man? What is a woman? What does non-binary mean, and in what combination are these aspects manifest? These questions tend to trigger a lot of discussion in our society; there are differing viewpoints. Religious conservatives want to assert traditional gender roles, but in many quarters, more than two genders are now recognized, and gender is understood as a social characteristic.

The conservative view of gender roles propagated by right-wing parties have an incendiary effect on public discussion of the topic. And today's guest is well-versed in these highly interesting debates, which are of great relevance right now. She is a woman, a Catholic ... a nun in fact, who studies gender equality issues within the Catholic Church. As her research has advanced, she has found herself becoming more open in her views around gender. Hello, Sister Jakoba, thank you very much for making time for us today.

Sister Jakoba:

Hi everybody.

Thea Fabian:

You are very well informed regarding both sides of the debate, I expect. What are your own views? Does anybody have to choose between God and gendering—or are they somehow compatible?

Sister Jakoba:

I see myself as a living example of how they are compatible. So no one has to decide for one and abandon the other. However, not only is the topic quite incendiary even beyond religious circles, but, as you noted, it's highly emotionally charged for many people, who are sure they are in the right and have a hardened position.

Thea Fabian:

Indeed, let's talk specifically about your research in just a moment, but first, how do people react when they hear that you, as a Catholic, are doing gender equality researching, both within and outside the Church?

Sister Jakoba:

They are usually rather surprised, at first. If the listeners could all see me now, I'm sitting here wearing a nun's habit and veil. So gender studies is not the first thing that comes to mind, seeing me, although that's regrettable. People are thus initially surprised to hear me presenting my research on gender issues. As is then often the case with prejudices, the initial surprise gives way to a very positive response of "oh, so that's possible when you're doing theology, wow." It is indeed possible for religious people, faithful believers, to be involved in

such research. Many different kinds of conversation can then ensue depending on the views held by the person I'm talking to. People with any sort of perspective on the issue will find that I'm pretty easy to talk to. Whether the person is conservative or sees themselves as more liberal, they will get a feeling like "Yeah, she's alright to talk to."

Thea Fabian:

And the bishops and priests, do they react positively too, or are they generally even more conservative?

Sister Jakoba:

Well I don't really move so much in the circles of bishops, popes and clergy. In the Catholic Church, and in religious contexts more broadly, you can find the entire spectrum of positions held, including among bishops, some of whom say this is a tremendously important issue, and that we as the Church shouldn't make ourselves irrelevant by refusing to even talk about the topic because it makes us uncomfortable. But of course there are also bishops and other office holders who say no, we can't go there, we have to uphold the Church line.

Thea Fabian:

Have you had the experience of talking to people active in the Church who then come to realize that gender is not really an issue totally separate and apart from their religion?

Sister Jakoba:

I'm not so much an activist as a teacher and researcher, and I really love it. Teaching at a university is great—I get to work with students who are doing Catholic theology as their major or minor. And they are like all other students in that they have preconceived notions around gender. And there they are then, taking my course for one reason or another. They may feel strongly for or against it, or maybe they always wanted to know more about the issue. Getting to work intensively with students over the course of a semester, exploring both sides of the debate with them, that's a great thing, because you can tell that a lot is happening with them. I also teach history of the Church. You can imagine that most of the time in courses you don't see students undergoing personal growth to such a noticeable extent. But it's different working with gender issues. I have frequently observed how they gain perspective and broaden their horizons a bit.

Thea Fabian:

The gender roles that remain so firmly ensconced in people's minds today have their origins in religious tradition, and that's what makes your work around female and male roles within in the Church so interesting. You studied theology, as you mentioned, focusing on constructs of masculinity among the Franciscan Order of Friars, who are obviously individuals who have committed their lives to their faith. Talk to us about the male gender roles, if you would. What contrasting roles were there, and what conceptions informed society and views within the Church?

Sister Jakoba:

I'm working on my doctorate, so my results are not all in yet, unfortunately, but that is the general thrust of my work and what I enjoy pursuing. I want to look at what actually happened back in the Middle Ages with the young men who decided to join the Order, where they were confronted with an entirely different ideal of masculinity. That is what my

doctoral thesis will be about, at any rate. They came to the Order from a society that expects men to have a wife and lots of children—preferably male children so as to have an eventual heir—a house, a farm ... men were supposed to self-aggrandize and accumulate personal power, become a successful merchant or a knight, demonstrating as much power as possible to the outside world. And then instead they opt to join a religious order for spiritual reasons, the Franciscan Order in this case. There they are confronted with many things: they are no longer allowed to carry weapons, are required to be celibate and not allowed to marry, and are not supposed to live out their sexuality the way it was expected of them in their previous life; and they have to dress very simply, displaying no symbols of status. I argue in my thesis that these factors caused a substantial identity crisis requiring them to abruptly and radically revise their gender identity. I believe that is no small thing even today, and it certainly was not in the Middle Ages.

Thea Fabian:

I hadn't really thought about that, but you're right, it must really have been a shock for men back then. Tell us more about your research work and your findings that our listeners might be interested to hear about.

Sister Jakoba:

Well I am a member of the Research Group for Theological Gender Studies, and we are active in research across an entire spectrum from the early Middle Ages, starting around 400 AD, up to the present day. One interesting thing is our work on Saint Wilgefortis of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. If our listeners were to google "Saint Wilgefortis" they would see something , amazing: crucifixes, but not with Jesus in a classic depiction that one would expect. Instead it's a person of apparently mixed or uncertain gender—bearded but dressed as a woman—on the cross, who in most depictions has obvious breasts. So all sorts of questions come up, starting with: who is this person, portrayed with quintessentially Christian symbolism? It is really fascinating, and so we did a bit of research into this particular saint, to find out what it's all about?

Thea Fabian:

What did your research involve, and what were your findings?

Sister Jakoba:

We studied the legend to discover how a Catholic, Christian saint could come to be portrayed as having both apparent female and male traits at the same time. According to legend, Wilgefortis was a young woman living at home with her father, who wanted to marry her off to a barbarian king. So quite a classic scenario: good Christian woman to be more or less sold to a barbarian. That may not go well. She prays and prays that she may be spared this fate, but her father is not a believer, and wants the marriage to happen, for a lot of power and money depends on it. But she refuses. She has no right to refuse however, so what is there to do? She is sitting in a cellar where her father has locked her in to keep her from escaping, praying to God to do something so she won't have to marry. She asks God: "Please transform me." Then God speaks to her (according to the legend) and tells her he will remake her in his image, so then the marriage cannot take place. And now you can guess what happens: she grows a beard. So the barbarian king she is supposed to marry is shocked and horrified, not being interested in marrying a woman with a beard. There are lots of intriguing aspects to this tale, starting with the beard—why a beard? And why is a woman with a beard no longer

marriageable all of a sudden? What does that phrase mean “God remade her in his image”? Is it a gender transformation that occurred here, or merely a change of outward appearances? Where does all this leave her in terms of gender identity? It’s quite intriguing.

Thea Fabian:

I think that leads to my next question, broadly. The Church is typically seen as a male domain. But your research has demonstrated that women have been able to exert major influence on the men in decision-making positions. Tell us then about some of these women, which I’m sure our listeners would be interested in.

Sister Jakoba:

I’d be glad to. My boss is Professor Muschiol, who has done important research work on women at the Second Vatican Council of 1962–1965, which was a conference of top-level Church decision-makers. That was the last big meeting of all bishops and cardinals in the Catholic Church, where those who are not the Pope got to have a voice in major decisions. Only men were invited to the Council—a gathering of roughly 3,000 without one single woman. Women already had a problem with this back then, and it seems unthinkable to us today. Starting in 1964, the third session, women were then invited to attend: 23 women, 2,498 Council Fathers. Not a big number, but 23 is a lot more than none. We looked into the avenues by which women exerted influence on the men who were to make the decisions. As an example, there’s a quote by the German-speaking woman Josefa Theresia Münch. She wrote very many letters to the Council Fathers, i.e. the bishops attending the Council, who, unlike her, had the right to speak and vote. She let them know quite assertively what she wanted to have done, what she wished of her representatives. Here’s the quote: “If c. 968 § 1 should be discussed at the next Council, I ask this of you: to ensure, to the extent you are able to do so, that c. 968 § 1 is amended to read as follows: ‘Sacram ordinationem valide recipit sola persona baptizata,’ or at a minimum ‘Sacram ordinationem valide recipit solus homo baptizatus.’<sup>1</sup> For those whose Latin isn’t quite what it used to be, like me, that means: “Holy ordination can only be validly received by a baptized person or human being.” Her intention here was to change the word “man” in favor of much more inclusive phrasing, providing two suggestions of either “person” or “human being”. I see it as very cutting-edge and extraordinarily relevant to our time, that back then she was already pushing for a more inclusive use of language. With the ultimate aim that receiving priestly ordination should not be restricted to men, but open to all. I’m highly impressed, looking back from today’s perspective, at how instead of saying “men and women” she instead was interested in maximally inclusive language, using wholly indeterminate, genderless words: “person” or “human being”. That was important to her, and she advanced theological arguments in her letters by quoting scripture and pointing out in a very practical, pastoral way that given the shortage of priests, gender-based restrictions are self-limiting and ridiculous.

Thea Fabian:

That really is fascinating, and has a lot to do with today’s debates and discussions, like you said. But was there really something like a feminist movement within the Church, or what exactly were those women after?

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<sup>1</sup> Münch, Josefa Theresia, Letter by Josefa Theresia Münch to the Council Fathers of German-speaking countries. Neukirch, October 5, 1962, in: Heyder, Regina (Hg.), Muschiol, Gisela (Hg.), *Katholikinnen und das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil. Petitionen, Berichte, Fotografien*. Münster 2018, 237.

Sister Jakoba:

They wanted many different things. The women themselves were quite different, some from Germany and other German-speaking countries, others from elsewhere, but they were all speaking out, and they eventually gained access to the Council. Their specific concerns varied, taking Mr. and Mrs. Alvarez Icaza, as an example, who wrote to the Council and shared the results of a huge international survey they conducted. It was not authoritative according to today's scientific standards, but they sent out questionnaires to families around the world. Even men have very little say in the Catholic Church unless they are an ordained priest or bishop, thus the aim was to solicit opinions on what people saw as the most pressing Church issues. The survey is a wonderful resource for looking back in time to see what issues were important to women, men and families in that day. There was great interest in the topic of contraception, and Church policies around sexuality generally. For context, the Council opened in 1962, only two years after the introduction of birth control pills in the US in 1960. So it was a hot topic to say the least, but not necessarily for celibate bishops, who had much different lives. They may have found it quite easy to just say: "No we don't need this new-fangled stuff, it runs counter to our theology." But the reality of the lives of women and of families was something else entirely, giving rise to a moral dilemma. The tone of these letters was by no means that of the "angry feminist," to put it one way, demanding sexual freedom or anything like that, but instead expressing ambivalent feelings, humbly communicating things like "we already have six children, eight children ... and we can't afford to support any more. Can't this be seen as a morally acceptable solution? The topic was of such great importance to women that they turned to the Council, and their testimonies illuminate the issue from all sides, their views covering the entire spectrum.

Thea Fabian:

So there were voices of opposition? Was there a counter-movement?

Sister Jakoba:

Sure, just like today, some women are not interested in feminist discourse, taking anti-feminist positions. And that includes women speaking out within the Catholic Church to say: "No, you don't represent all women, and we believe that existing male and female gender roles are right and proper, which have been passed down through the ages on the basis of traditional concepts of man and woman." Some women for example approve of women being prohibited from being ordained as priests, and some agree with the Catholic Church's stance opposing birth control.

Thea Fabian:

What is revealed by looking at gender roles from a historical perspective?

Sister Jakoba:

It's a fascinating and incredibly important field of research, being crucial to how we can understand today's debates. How is it that gender roles have come to be so firmly ensconced in our minds? Like if you go out and ask people in the street what they think is typically female and typically male, the answers are always the same. Why is that? I think it's really important to explore this to be able to observe the religious word games that are being played and the operative concepts derived from religious belief. I also think theologians today should be contributing their expertise to the discourse. I can point out the Bible passages that are most often cited and show how these can be understood in an entirely

different way. And that there is a kind of parallel history to the Second Vatican Council, what it meant and was all about for the women who were involved, and talk about intriguing figures like St. Wilgefortis who completely explode our notions about Christianity in the Middle Ages.

Thea Fabian:

Thanks for pointing all that out, it's great to get a different perspective on history. I presume many of our listeners were unaware, as I was. But going from the past to the future now, heading into the end of our podcast today, what is your take on the gender debate which has right-wing parties so inflamed, what role can or does the Church play in all this?

Sister Jakoba:

The ongoing gender debate in our society is highly emotionally charged, and the discourse tone is aggressive. It's not an issue suited for a casual exchange of opinion, like "Hey, how do you feel about it? What's your view?" Instead, people engage combatively, partly because the right wing has been flogging its intolerant gender ideology ever more stridently over the last ten years. There is no interest in considering what might be the best solution for linguistic gendering. People get angry and defensive, so it's impossible to talk about making progress on equality. Nobody is against equal rights, in principle. But they always make it about some kind of global conspiracy, propagating an ideology around the notion of "protecting children." These are familiar topoi from history, in particular German history with National Socialism and the Third Reich, especially the talk about child molesters. And I am concerned about how things are going. For historians it is particularly important to point out that this kind of defamation is nothing new, as it has been borrowed as a longstanding element of dictatorial propaganda strategy.

Thea Fabian:

It is indeed apparent how important your research is for promoting solid, fact-based education on the issues. What impact do you think your work may have within the Church, and for larger society?

Sister Jakoba:

For the Church I think it's important to even make initial attempts at explaining in a factual, dispassionate way what gender research is all about in the first place. For it's not the fruit of some "evil ideology" plaguing our society, as it has been represented to be, supposedly undermining our values, using all these loaded terms ... The views of American philosopher Judith Butler, for example, and other scholars should be calmly communicated. And why looking at social constructs around gender is an interesting project. So first we need to educate people within the Church before going out to do the same throughout society, letting people know that the Church and all things Catholic are not totally out of step with the times or anti-gendering, pointing out that differing interpretations of the Bible are possible. We can approach anthropology from a different perspective that remains fundamentally Christian. I believe this educational project needs to move in both directions, as an attempt to mediate between two camps. It's not so much about convincing either side to adopt the other's position; our work is more about educating people, promoting dialogue between the two camps who otherwise will not engage with each other.

Thea Fabian:

Wrapping up the podcast, we have two “speed questions” for you, which won’t take so much time to answer. The first is: what led you to get into this kind of research? What were your personal motivating factors?

Sister Jakoba:

I have always been interested in gender and gender equality issues, even before I went to university. Growing up and being socialized as a Catholic, you will end up being directly confronted by these issues. And once I became exposed, I never lost interest. Church history was my primary field of study, and then after becoming a research associate at the Chair of Medieval and Modern Church History, I was thrilled to be offered this position in gender studies. That was when I really dove into it.

Thea Fabian:

The research group you are involved in at the University of Bonn is actually a very special thing with few precedents—would you touch on that?

Sister Jakoba:

The University of Münster is the only other state university in German-speaking Europe to have a Research Group for Theological Gender Studies. Thus we in Bonn along with Münster represent something unique within the German academic landscape. We have a tremendous opportunity to inform the debate while demonstrating the University of Bonn’s commitment to gender studies and heightening our research profile generally.

Thea Fabian:

Would you have any last words for our audience members, to conclude with?

Sister Jakoba:

Yes—you are welcome to get in touch with me if you feel like working on something together or discussing these issues. There’s a link in the show notes, so contact us to find out about what all we are doing at the research group. Our seminars are open to the public, not just for students, and we would love to meet you sometime.

Thea Fabian: Thank you very much for talking to us.

Sister Jakoba:

The pleasure is all mine!

Thea Fabian:

Sister Jakoba is a Catholic nun doing gender equality research within the Catholic Church. Our talk with her revealed how her work is anchoring gender as a relevant topic within the Church, going beyond the conservative gender roles upheld by the Church of yesterday. She also pointed out how gender equality and gender norms are not exclusively an issue of relevance to our modern times, as the Church has addressed these throughout its history. However, education is still needed today throughout society. Research on a sound scholarly basis and public awareness campaigns can help communicate to the public that the Church is moving into a new era of respect for gender equality.