THE TWO-THOUSAND-YEAR-OLD VIRGINS

How Christianity blurred the line between celibacy and androgyny.

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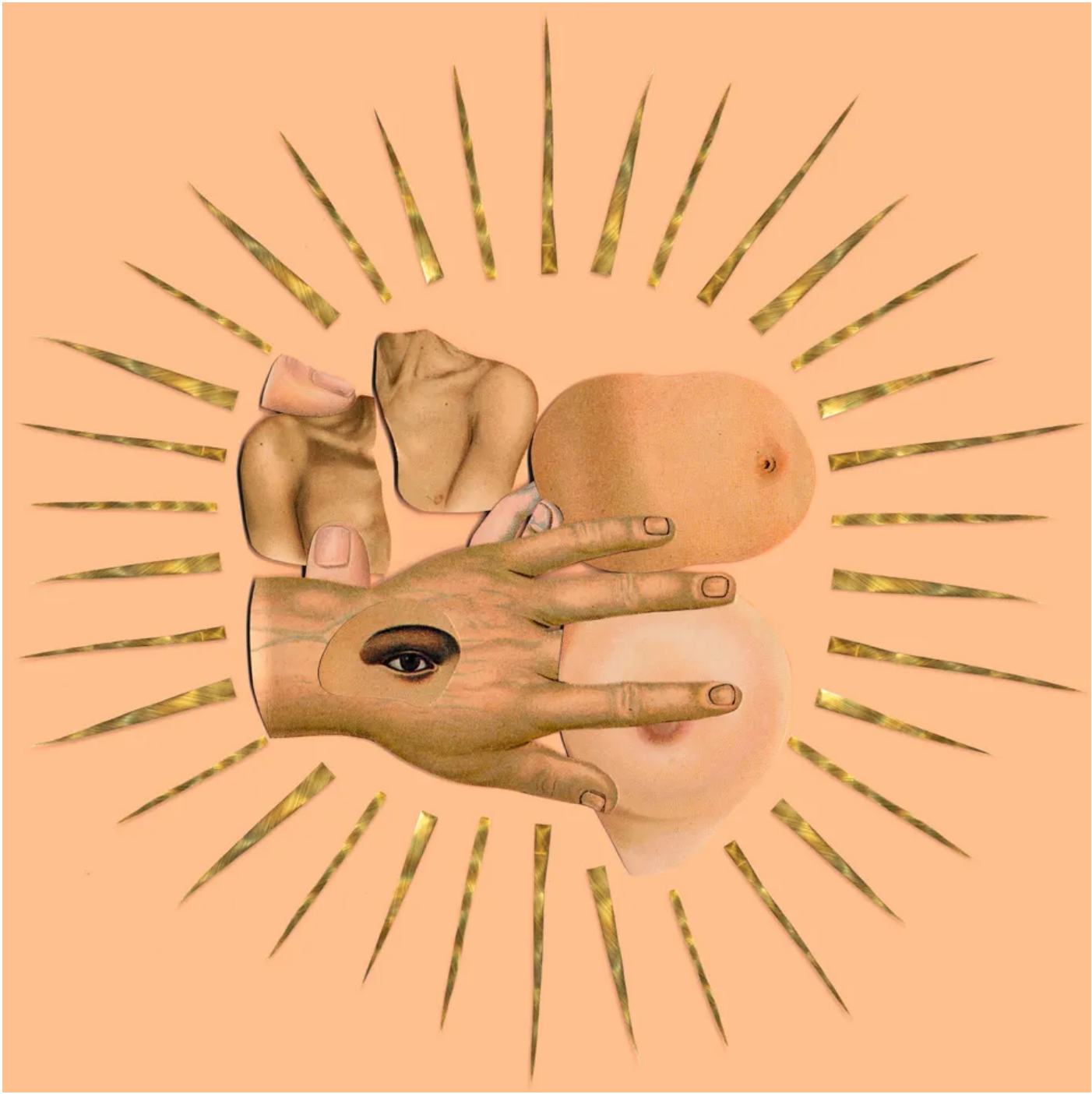

Illustration by Nicole Natri

As far as we know, Jesus never said anything about gay sex. He did, however, take a stand on family life: he was opposed. Those who are worthy of Heaven, he says, in Luke 20:35, need not bother with marriage; in fact, per Luke 14:26, the true disciple must "hate" the family he already has. "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake," he declares, in the Gospel of Matthew, "will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life." Christianity's earliest missionaries were also chilly on pair-bonding, in part because they believed that at any moment Jesus would return to whisk his followers off to a heavenly reward many times better than sex. With the rapture so near, who had time for a wife and kids?

Jesus' failure to return in the first century—what the Oxford historian Diarmaid MacCulloch calls "the first Great Disappointment of many in Christian history"—did not silence the anti-family tendency in Christian thought. As MacCulloch argues in his thrilling and comprehensive new book, "Lower Than the Angels: A History of Sex and Christianity" (Viking), marriage and family have in historical terms come only lately into fashion among Christians. "It is better to marry than to burn," the apostle Paul famously wrote, but even better was to douse the flames of lust with an analogous but more elevated communion with God, to partake in what MacCulloch calls the "substitute families" of a celibate religious life. Divorce, though generally forbidden, was allowed if a husband wanted to leave marriage for monkhood. In Western Europe, clergy did not regularly perform weddings until the twelfth century, and, as late as the sixteenth century in England, such ceremonies were deemed too lowly to take place in a church's inner sanctum; they might instead be held outside on the porch, after which newlyweds could enter the church to attend mass. MacCulloch points out that this approach is much like the compromise that some churches, including the Anglican and

Catholic ones, have struck with gay couples today.

MacCulloch has more than an academic interest in Christian attitudes toward sex. The son and grandson of priests, he pursued the same role in the Anglican Church until he decided that it was impossible to do so as a gay man. His resulting break with the priesthood was, he told the *Guardian*, last year, "a matter of extraordinary stress, trauma, misery"; he understands that his critics might see this new book as "payback." But MacCulloch, who in his second career as an academic has won most of the prizes a historian can win, does not come across as an embittered man. He remains a member of the Anglican Church—per the *Guardian*, he continues to play the organ on Sundays—and he seems to take pleasure less in embarrassing the institution than in sharing the fruits of many decades of study.

For much of Christian history, MacCulloch suggests, all sex was sinful—even the marital and procreative, even the unconscious. (As the Anglican theologian Adrian Thatcher writes in "Vile Bodies: The Body in Christian Teaching, Faith and Practice," "It is difficult to believe the agony and consternation caused to perfection-seeking monks by wet dreams over the centuries.") Religious leaders specified days on which, for medical or liturgical reasons, married couples were not to copulate—one Irish rule book from the early seventh century excluded a good two-thirds of the year. Russian Orthodox guides for confessors grouped excessive marital sex with sins such as anal intercourse or prostitution. St. Jerome, a tremendously influential fourth-century commentator known for his Latin translation of the Bible, liked to remind people that "every man who is sexually unrestrained in his interaction with his wife commits adultery with her." Some Christians, including several notable saints, sought to escape sin entirely through celibate marriages, which, per MacCulloch, "were esteemed and practiced for more than a millennium."

These early Christians' opposition to procreation—their nose-thumbing at what has always been the easiest way of spreading a religion—is without question a revolutionary and anti-materialistic stance, and yet it is a good example that what is revolutionary and anti-materialistic is not necessarily

conducive to human happiness. If you were a Christian and your spouse died young, as people often did in the fourth century, you might be forbidden sex or parenthood for the rest of your life. The controversy around a widow's remarriage stemmed partly from a theological analogy in which a woman was meant to serve one husband as the church served one God; under such logic, a second marriage seemed almost polytheistic. But another factor was simply a visceral disgust of sex and family life. MacCulloch quotes a letter from the same Jerome in which he urges a young widow in his circle not to remarry:

> You've already learned the miseries of marriage. . . . It's like unwholesome food, and now that you have relieved your heaving stomach of its bile, why should you return to it again, 'like a dog to its vomit'? . . . Perhaps you are afraid that your noble race will die out, and your father will not have a brat to crawl about his shoulders and smear his neck with filth.

MacCulloch is particularly engaging in his discussion of how baffling the early Christian mortification of the flesh would have seemed to contemporaries. Greco-Roman tradition had long idealized the vigorous, penetrating patriarch, and Jewish custom celebrated those men who had large families and multiple wives. Reversing this hierarchy, Christians held that status among men increased with greater remove from sex. The laity were to be monogamous, the holy men celibate, and the actually divine would not even feel lust. In the Bible, angels had been portrayed as the seducers of mortal women, much like Greek gods. Once Heaven was seen as a place without sex, they were deemed too lofty for such concerns. St. Augustine argued that Jesus did not have erections. Another theologian noted that, if true, this would make the Son of God functionally a eunuch.

The line between celibacy and androgyny—between not having sex and not having *a* sex—can blur. Some translators assume that Jesus' admiring reference to "eunuchs who have made themselves for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" actually alludes to the celibate, and gloss the phrase as "those who choose to live like eunuchs," or even those who "choose not to marry." This downplays the social position of actual eunuchs, who sometimes rose to high-ranking positions in the church. As MacCulloch writes, impoverished parents might

arrange for their son to be castrated to better his prospects for religious life and education.

Even men who kept the machinery of sex and simply chose not to use it could be feminized. Nuns today are still sometimes spoken of as the "brides of Christ"; before the church was sensitive to gay innuendo, the institution itself, and by implication its male leaders, were, too. A third-century bishop drew the analogy further when he wrote flatteringly of the apostle Paul that he had received "into his womb the seeds of life." The horny angels of the Bible had been depicted with beards or even bald spots; by the end of the fourth century, they transformed into the ruby-cheeked pretty boys we know today. Origen, a prominent third-century commentator, controversially argued that humans in Heaven would undergo a similar transformation—that anyone who made it to a lustless afterlife would lose their sexual differentiation.

Of course, then as now, not everyone waited for the afterlife. In the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, Jesus says that "every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven." In other words, by distancing themselves from the physicality and sex long associated with women, female ascetics and nuns approached something like manhood. A lease from around 400 C.E. refers to two ascetics as "female renouncers." Amma Sarah, a fifth-century hermit in what is now Egypt, is quoted as saying, "According to nature I am a woman, but not according to my thoughts." A hagiography written by a man about his cloistered virgin sister hesitates to insult her with the title of "woman," given that she is "above nature."

These days, Christians often employ the word "unnatural" to argue that something is morally wrong. In the morality of early Christians, however, nature was exactly what needed to be outrun. A second-century document known as the Protoevangelium of James sought to save Mary from any taint of nature's pollution. It introduced the idea that Mary had remained a virgin until death, even after *giving birth* to Jesus, not to mention after the conception and birth of his theologically inconvenient siblings. (Some Catholics today hold

that the references to Jesus' siblings in scripture refer to Joseph's children from a previous marriage.) The Protoevangelium further claimed that Mary herself had been divinely conceived. Several centuries later, this idea would be retrofitted to spare Mary from Augustine's concept of the original sin that stains all the descendants of the sexually active Adam and Eve. The Christmas carol "O Come, All Ye Faithful" claims that God "abhors not the virgin's womb"—as opposed, presumably, to His abhorrence of the other ones.

I had heard "O Come, All Ye Faithful" many times but had never noticed this line until I read about it in Helen King's lively "Immaculate Forms: A History of the Female Body in Four Parts" (Basic). King is a British classicist interested in the many ways that women's bodies have been misunderstood by the Western world, including the damage done by Christianity. She and MacCulloch are friendly—King was an early reader for his manuscript—and they share a connection to the Anglican Church: King is currently an elected member of its synod, and a vice-chair of an Anglican anti-discrimination group. But, where MacCulloch retains a certain reverence toward what for him remains the capital-"C" Church, King's tone is cheeky throughout. They each take, for example, a different approach to the cult interpretation of Christ's side wound as a type of vulva: MacCulloch dismisses this as "cringe-making," while King dives right in. Her main critique of "Lower Than the Angels," MacCulloch told an interviewer, is that he didn't mention the clitoris enough.

King's book does not suffer from the same deficit. "Immaculate Forms" is organized not by time period but by body part—breast, clitoris, hymen, and womb—a choice that makes the book less a sustained argument in support of a certain kind of femaleness than a compendium of trivia ranging from Eve to Mary, from ancient-Roman wet nurses to Victorian clitorectomy clinics. But the variety and contradiction of the trivia provide its own kind of argument. "The story I will tell," King writes, "is not a reassuring narrative of progress, but one with no clear direction, no steady, logical development toward a 'now' in which we know pretty much all there is to know." Her book leaves you with the impression that, no matter what you believe to be obvious and natural

about the female body, somebody in power once believed the exact opposite.

In the West, virginity, orgasms, and clitorectomies have each been deemed both healthy and unhealthy for women, who have been imagined as both hornier and less horny than men. The bodies of men and women have been entirely different, or fundamentally the same but simply "cooked" for different amounts of time, such that a woman might heat up and spontaneously turn male. (There may be some truth to this: today, we understand children who unexpectedly go through male puberty to have a condition called 5-alpha-reductase deficiency.) King's examples are almost dizzying in their zaniness. "Which is more 'natural,' " she asks, "to have puppies suckle at your breasts to take off excess milk or to make breast milk into ice cream?"

In her discussion of Christianity, King relishes the absurdity that results when a religion that is disgusted by female sexuality also engages in mother worship. Some medieval and Renaissance artists, for example, portrayed Mary breast-feeding the infant Jesus at a chaste distance, such that the milk spurts of its own accord into his mouth. Depictions of the Annunciation—when the angel Gabriel came to tell Mary that she would give birth to Jesus—struggle to portray just how the Word of God entered her body. They knew it wasn't through the vagina—the so-called gates of Hell—but they couldn't agree on an alternate orifice. The ear? The mouth? King explains that for much of Christian history menstruating women were not allowed into religious spaces; at some modern-day Coptic Orthodox churches, they are still forbidden from taking communion. Would the virginal and so presumably menstruating Mary have been barred from worshipping her son? Such tremendous disgust for the female body was no Christian innovation—the Hebrew Bible's Book of Leviticus claims that anyone who even touches a seat on which a menstruating woman has sat is unclean for the rest of the day—but it is hard to square with all the talk of the blessèd fruit of her womb.

It's easy to forget that Christianity spent its first centuries in relative obscurity. The sexual mores of Jesus and his followers might today have the

same curio value as, say, Manichaean vegetarianism or Zoroastrian incest. One reason they do not is because of a battle at a bridge in Rome in the year 312 that took place between Constantine and Maxentius, two aspirants to the throne of the Roman Empire. Before fighting, Constantine ordered his soldiers to pray to the Christian God. What happened next was world-historical: Maxentius drowned in the river, and the triumphant Constantine began to spread Christianity through his territories. "On any rational political calculation," MacCulloch writes, this "would seem bizarre: Christianity was simply not that important in the empire, and Christians would have been delighted merely not to be persecuted."

Over the next centuries, as Christendom spread east through Asia and north and west through Europe, its ambitions grew, along with the institutional hierarchy needed to implement them. The Bishops of Rome relied on a set of eighth-century forged documents to claim an unprecedented position of universal authority as Popes. Exposure to new polygamous cultures prompted the church to view marriage, for the first time, as something it should trouble itself with regulating—even as the Church at large continued to keep weddings out of churches, Eastern Orthodox leaders codified the Christian ideal of monogamy. Competition with Islam led Christians to adjust their views on pacifism and procreation: by the twelfth century, violence against Muslims was holy and the production of children to aid in the fight was, for those not required to be celibate, a Christian duty. In a reversal, theologians now argued that, actually, Adam and Eve had enjoyed sex.

The imperialist Christians' decidedly worldly reasons to support marriage and procreation did not do away with the idealization of celibacy so much as shift its accounting: the sex allowance for married people to reproduce would be offset by stricter celibacy from the servants of God. As late as the tenth century, a majority of priests were married, nuns were occasionally married to monks, and some bishops and Popes had children, whom they might marry off advantageously. Now a desire to hold on to church lands, which clergy could bequeath to their legitimate sons, led to a crackdown on clerical marriage. The

backlash would eventually provoke in part both the schism between the Latin West and the Greek East, and the Protestant Reformation. Catholics viewed the upstart Protestants as loosey-goosey on matters of sex—Martin Luther had even flirted with accepting polygamy. In 1563, a papal council doubled down: anyone who proclaimed that "it is better and happier to be united in matrimony than to remain in virginity or celibacy" was to be excommunicated for heresy.

The emphasis on the procreative possibility of sex gave rise to a new respect for "nature" and a new understanding of nonreproductive sex acts as sins against it. The relative seriousness of these sins can be gleaned from their associated punishments: one Irish penintential called for a year's penance for bestiality, four years for oral sex, and seven years for sodomy. With the purity of the clergy a matter of ever-growing importance, church leaders zeroed in on the types of sins that men in cloistered single-sex environments could more feasibly commit. Peter Damian, a prominent eleventh-century cardinal who did much to popularize homophobia in the church, preached that a father who has sex with his daughter was less sinful than a bishop who has sex with a priest he has ordained, because, while the father has sinned merely against a biological child, the bishop has sinned against a spiritual one. By 1120, the church council in Jerusalem ordered that sodomites, like heretics, be burned at the stake.

Later laws against homosexuality sometimes came about for petty or arbitrary reasons. A 1534 law that outlawed "buggery" on pain of death may very well have been an effort by King Henry VIII to bully the church, even then widely considered a den of buggers, into accepting his marriage to Anne Boleyn. Several centuries later, an 1885 English law against "gross indecency" was proposed and passed by men who had for the most part spent their youths at the country's famously gay boarding schools. The statute was then copied in penal codes throughout the British Empire. It further spread through soft power: just as earlier Muslim territorial gains had led some Christians to wonder if they shouldn't adopt the Islamic prohibition of icons, British

imperial successes inspired Muslims to crack down on sodomy, which they had shown little interest in punishing until the twentieth century. "Such," MacCulloch writes, "were some unanticipated outcomes from the playing fields of Eton."

The celibate ideal, a constant throughout Catholic history, has found new expression in the modern divide between straight people, who may copulate without sin in marriage, and gay people, who can avoid sin only through lifelong chastity. A 1975 declaration known as the "Persona Humana" set out what largely remains the Catholic attitude today: that homosexual acts are "intrinsically disordered" (a phrase that also applies to masturbation) but that homosexuals who just can't help themselves "must certainly be treated with understanding and sustained in the hope of overcoming their personal difficulties and their inability to fit into society." In practice, overcoming their personal difficulties can mean conversion therapy; the church believes that God made certain people pathologically and possibly incurably gay, but in true Christ-like fashion, it never gives up on a hopeless case.

Since Pope Francis's ascendancy, the Catholic Church's attitude toward gay and trans people has become slightly less harsh and slightly more confusing. Many people will remember that, in 2013, Pope Francis said "Who am I to judge?" in response to a question about homosexuality; perhaps fewer remember that the question, according to a biographer of Francis's, was in reference to a Vatican priest who looked after the papal house and who had "been found trapped in the elevator of the nunciature with a gay rent boy known to the police." Francis seems unsure how to address homosexuality among his colleagues: he has both denied that there are any members of the feared "gay lobby" in the Vatican and complained about the high levels of "*frociaggine*"—"faggotry"—in seminaries, a comment for which he later apologized. And for all the progress Francis has made in welcoming all of God's children, including meeting with several groups of trans Catholics, he also oversaw last year's "Dignitas Infinita," which proclaimed that "any sex-change intervention, as a rule, risks threatening the unique dignity the person

has received from the moment of conception."

This year, a conference of Italian bishops ruled that openly gay men can join orders as long as they maintain the celibacy expected of all priests, a decision that normalized what has long been a quiet reality for many priests and nuns. A 2020 book called "Love Tenderly: Sacred Stories of Lesbian and Queer Religious" includes the stories of twenty-three sisters from around the United States, many of whom have been out and (mostly) celibate for decades. The book makes clear that a vow of celibacy can be liberating, both as an alternative to heterosexuality—one nun calls the idea of sex with a man "grotesque"—and as a radical (and, as several nuns claim, "queer") alternative to the exclusivity and selfishness of pair-bonding. But the dilemma posed to the lesbian who must choose between the woman she loves and the God she loves is described by nuns again and again in terms of the greatest pain and difficulty. The vow of celibacy strikes me as a sort of self-imposed conversion therapy, an effort to sexually reorient oneself toward what one nun calls "a relationship with someone whom I can neither see nor touch."

As I read these nuns' stories, I was reminded of a young woman named Alana Chen, who, like me, used to attend St. Thomas Aquinas, a small Catholic church in Boulder, Colorado. When Alana was fourteen, she confessed to a priest that she was attracted to girls, and spent the next few years being counselled by him and others in the church, in the hopes of becoming a nun. "He forgave my unspeakable sin," she wrote in her diary. "He took my defilement and buried it." In 2019, when Alana was twenty-three, she gave an interview to the Denver *Post* about her many years undergoing what she now viewed as conversion therapy: "I felt like the church and the counseling was the thing that was saving me," she said. "The worse I got, the more I clung to it." Four months later, Alana's body was found at a local reservoir. Amid the uproar, a spokesperson for the Archdiocese of Denver gave a statement to the press. "A person is always free to accept or reject what the Church teaches," he said, "but it is not 'conversion therapy' or 'religious abuse' to teach about the beauty of a life of chastity." ♦