

Swarthmore College

Works

Library Staff Works

Library & Information Science

5-1-2012

Review Of "Jesus Is Female: Moravians And Radical Religion In Early America" By A. S. Fogleman

Wendy E. Chmielewski

Swarthmore College Peace Collection, wchmiel1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/sta-libraries>



Part of the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wendy E. Chmielewski. (2012). "Review Of "Jesus Is Female: Moravians And Radical Religion In Early America" By A. S. Fogleman". *Nova Religio*. Volume 15, Issue 4. 122-124. DOI: 10.1525/nr.2012.15.4.122 <https://works.swarthmore.edu/sta-libraries/16>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Staff Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

parochial event in the Eastern Cape, marking *Bulletproof* as an important contribution to a growing scholarship about how certain texts gained transnational readerships (e.g. Isabel Hofmeyr's *The Portable Bunyan* (2004)).

However, I missed any sustained discussion of religion in *Bulletproof*, and in particular, an analysis of the role that Christianity played in the Cattle Killing prophecies and in shaping the wider millennial consciousness that characterized nationalist thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For example, a discussion of the Independent Churches of the Eastern Cape, and how these establishments continued (or didn't) the Xhosa tradition of prophetic resistance, would have been illuminating.

Further, despite Wenzel's commitment to tracing a non-official, popular history of nationalism through the literary "afterlives" of the Cattle Killing, the majority of the texts she discusses are indisputably elite writings; documents penned in English by African elites (educators, politicians, and mission church clergymen) for their equally well-read, modernizing audiences. We are given little sense of these texts' histories of reception: were these texts widely read, who read them, and what kinds of discussions and arguments over these texts shaped notions of the South African nation over several generations of readers?

However, these are questions for another project which do not detract from the value of the present text, and its important contribution to our understanding of the multiple resources South African nation-builders drew upon. *Bulletproof* will be read with interest by students of nationalism and post-colonialism, those interested in prophecy and millennialism, as well as in South African historical and literary studies.

Joel Cabrita, School of Oriental and African Studies

Jesus Is Female: Moravians and Radical Religion in Early America. By Aaron Spencer Fogleman. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 298 pages. \$24.95 paper.

Aaron Spencer Fogleman has written a fascinating book that adds greatly to our knowledge of the complex religious beliefs and practices of those who immigrated to North America in the eighteenth century. He focuses on German, Swedish, and Dutch Protestant immigrants and the challenges presented by new settlements away from the center of religious orthodoxy and power. In his introduction Fogleman writes that some nonconformist religious groups, such as the Moravians, challenged the family hierarchy, the relationships between men and women, and also shifted traditional gendered expectations of the divine, making, "Jesus and other persons of the Christian deity female" (2).

Fogleman first explores the history of the settlement of European radical pietists, such as the Dunkers, Brethren, New Mooners, and Moravians in the New World and their challenge to Lutheran orthodoxy. He then examines the gender notions of religious practice and belief in the traditional Protestant world of the eighteenth century. Other scholars have explored the unique practices and differing gender relationships in Moravian and other radical pietist communities, but Fogleman's detailed analysis of how Moravians spread their religious ideas and practices to other German immigrants, and the challenges this presented, is one of the most valuable parts of the book.

The most provocative chapters appear in Part II as Fogleman describes Moravian beliefs in feminized or androgynous visions of Jesus and the sexualization of Christ's side wound, received on the cross. Color reproductions of Moravian art work of erotic "side wound verses" (Plate 4) and "scenes of piety in every day life depicted inside the side wound represented as a womb" (Plate 5), depict a Christ who bled through vagina-like openings, who suckled like a mother, and offered sensual pleasure, like a lover. Fogleman posits that this sexualized and feminized Moravian theology, with new beliefs about familial connections that promoted alternatives to the nuclear family, and allowed single and married women unprecedented power, all challenged traditional patriarchal authority.

While Moravians did not consider women the equals of men, many women held positions of leadership, and some, like Anna Nitschmann, gained substantial standing across North America. Moravian missionaries, women as well as men, conducted successful revivals among the German immigrants and converted some Native Americans, helping to spread the Great Awakening of the 1740s. The Moravians provided religious leadership to immigrants, when the Lutherans had far fewer ministers in the field. Moravians also offered medical services and schooling to frontier communities where there were few doctors or educators.

Fogleman posits that Moravian gender practices—allowing women to preach, celibacy, and alternative family relationships—would not by themselves have been seen as dangerous. However, the rapid spread of Moravian religious ideas, promulgated by dozens of missionaries throughout the Mid-Atlantic region, also challenged the authority and power of the Lutheran and Reformed clergy. The Lutherans began sending additional ministers and publishing polemics denouncing the radical pietists. Tensions between the competing groups soon erupted into violence, with clergy and even laypersons attacking Moravian preachers. Arguments over Moravian beliefs in ecumenicalism, re-ordering of religious hierarchies, and shifts in gender order were at the core of these battles.

Fogleman concludes that the importance of this history lies in "the opportunity and limits to radical religion in America" (218). Orthodox

believers fought against a social and religious “disorder” which centered around changes in gender order and the “radical gospel of femaleness in the Trinity” (219). Although religious innovators remained prolific, even the radical pietists eventually came to limit their practices in exchange for acceptance in the growing North American communities in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Wendy E. Chmielewski, Swarthmore College Peace Collection

Revenge of the Forbidden City: The Suppression of the Falungong in China, 1999–2005. By James W. Tong. Oxford University Press, 2009. 282 pages. \$49.95 cloth.

Revenge of the Forbidden City is not the best book to read if one wants an introduction to the history of Falun Gong (a.k.a. Falun Dafa), the Chinese new religious movement that has endured more than a decade of serious repression in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). James Tong assumes that most readers are familiar with Falun Gong and provides only a bare, though adequate, introduction to the movement and its spread before the Chinese government crackdown in 1999.

Tong’s primary goal in this book is to document the extent and range of the government’s suppression of the movement. To this end, he has scoured hundreds of Chinese language sources, picking up scattered bits of information from newspapers and unclassified government documents—from both the big industrialized cities and remote rural backwaters—to create a comprehensive picture of the government’s campaign. Since the PRC is still very much a totalitarian state, it places a premium on the control of information. As far as anyone knows, there is no central collection of data on the Falun Gong, at least that any outsider can access. Tong has had to do the gathering himself. It appears to have been a monumental task.

His efforts provide readers with a detailed, though necessarily incomplete, picture of the crackdown. Readers soon realize that the leaders of the PRC must have seen Falun Gong as a very serious threat to their rule. While this may seem bizarre to westerners, there is no other way to make sense of the incredible efforts and vast sums the Chinese Communist Party spent to eradicate this spiritual movement. While less far reaching and economically disruptive than the factional struggles of the decade-long Cultural Revolution, the assault on Falun Gong must have cost the government hundreds of thousands of work hours and billions of *yuan*. It clearly constitutes the most thoroughgoing suppression of a new religious movement in China since the Taiping Rebellion. The government’s expenditure of time, money and human effort is mind numbing. In fact, mind numbing is probably the best