

# Editorial

**Sarojini Nadar<sup>1</sup>**

2020 will be remembered as the year that brought the world to a standstill as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Here in South Africa, it will also be remembered as the year that the president declared gender-based violence (GBV) to be a second pandemic. As a journal, we have long been committed to offering critical research that interrogates the links between religious belief systems and GBV. These belief systems are often propped up by interpretations of sacred texts that theorise gender roles as God-ordained, rather than socially constructed. Scholars who bring gender-critical theories to bear on sacred texts, have been challenging these interpretations through rigorous, structured, and systematic analyses of texts that would otherwise be used in normative ways to circumscribe the power of women.

Two such scholars, in this issue – Johnathan Jodamus and Jeremy Punt – offer close and careful readings of biblical texts that challenge normative understandings of sex difference and heteronormativity within their selected texts. In his article, *Redeeming Paul? Disruptive Masculinity, Sexual Autonomy and Sexual Freedom in 1 Corinthians 7*, Jodamus invites us to consider the ways in which Paul, regularly accused of entrenching submissive roles for women, and upholding authoritarian roles for men, might through an alternative socio-rhetorical reading, subvert some traditional norms of masculinity. He is careful not to suggest that this reading of Paul can be attributed to all Pauline texts, by leaving the question of the redemption of Paul, from his ostensibly patriarchal tendencies, open.

Jeremy Punt, in his article, *An Apocalyptic Womb? The Great Harlot of Revelation 17-18* also invites us to possibly redeem the book of Revelation, which has regularly been noted as a violent text that legitimises social control over women's bodies, and argues that the

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Great Harlot has habitually received scholarly attention for her “sexual prowess.” Punt demonstrates that the womb is a neglected and unacknowledged aspect of interpretation in apocalyptic scholarship. He asserts that, through a redemptive hermeneutic, the “life-producing womb” of the “Great Harlot” might be a site for reclaiming power, and invites the reader to reconsider the womb’s apocalyptic significance.

While the biblical scholars struggled to free sacred texts from their heteronormative and misogynist shackles, the three other authors in this issue look beyond texts to aesthetics as a means to engage with the authoritarian heteronormativity and patriarchy within organised religion. In Ala Rabiha Alhourani’s *Aesthetics and Ethics of Islam: The Art of Being a Gay Muslim*, the case for moving beyond the tired “debate of the compatibility of Islam with homosexuality” is made. The author invites us, instead, through an ethnography of a gay Muslim artist, to consider how gay Muslims make sense of their faith through aesthetic means, and puts forward the space of art as “a space that allows LGBTIQ Muslims to re-imagine a social reality and relationship beyond the authoritarian normative interpretations of Islam and the constraints of a prescribed social identity” – perhaps as a space of hope.

Selina Palm’s article, *Sustaining Feminist Hope in Covid-19 Times of Despair and Anxiety* suggests that hope can be nurtured through the power of narratives, and through the nurturing of new habits. Drawing on the work of feminist theologian, Flora Keshgegian’s five contours for new social habits of hoping in women’s lives, Palm asserts that hope is to be found in the everyday embodied experiences of women, even when they are painful and raw. “Hope generating narratives...become[s] theological acts which can help us to lament, recognise limits, understand time differently, imagine creatively and seek good relationships with one another. It is not just the raw material onto which theology must then be crafted,” says Palm.

In line with staying with the real and embodied, and moving away from abstract discourse and religious norms, S.N. Nyeck, in the article, *Poetics: Queer Recesses of the Heart and the Spirit of Intimacy with the Africana Household* invites us to consider the “steering power of poetics.” In this article, Nyeck reads the Africana household through the poetics of Audreya Lorde, all the while reminding us that “the personal is not just political, but it is spiritual.” Nyeck suggests that “the exploration of poetry as a spiritual practice of the queered self...blurs the boundaries

between religion and politics, in order to offer an integral account of gender diversity within the Africana household.” In this article, that is itself poetically written, the poetic power of the Africana household that is non-dualistic, intimate, and “a reliable foundation for political solidarity,” is indeed manifest.

Overall, the essays in this issue collectively provide significant, creative, and innovative contributions to the field of gender and religion.