

## **Jesus Camp Queen and the Performance of (Fundamentalist Christian) Gender**

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*Jesus Camp Queen* is an autoethnographic performance piece that explores gender in the context of late twentieth-century conservative American Protestantism. The piece makes important contributions to scholarship, both in content and in method. First, as a specific example of the exploration and examination of gender performance from a first-hand perspective, it provides a window into the daily lives of women/girls raised in the highly gendered subculture of evangelicalism and fundamentalism. Second, the approach the author takes to this material, described as autoethnography, pushes the boundaries of methodological innovation in the social sciences (especially the social scientific study of religion) (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011).

### **Overview and Summary**

*Jesus Camp Queen (JCQ)* is named for the controversial and highly emotional 2006 documentary *Jesus Camp*, which follows children through their experience at a Christian summer camp (Grady and Ewing 2006). This film has been both praised for the way in which it lays bare the shockingly manipulative quality of the camp's practices and criticized for itself being abusive of the children whose stories it chronicled. The author of *JCQ* explores her own indoctrination into the expected gender norms in this world, gender norms she performed well enough to become summer camp queen, but which ultimately led to her departure from that world in what she described as a "blaze of glory" (Latham, "Jesus Camp Queen," this issue, page TBD).

### **Autoethnography**

The longstanding divide between qualitative and quantitative research in the social scientific study of religion is rooted in postmodernist criticisms of quantitative claims to objectivity. Ethnographers seek to explore meaning-making, the social construction of reality, and the legitimization of certain social orderings in ways thought to be inaccessible to quantitative researchers. Ethnographers recognize that, even with careful, systematized methods for observation, the ethnographer is always presenting his/her perception of the thing, and not the thing in itself. Yet with strategies such as triangulation and reflexivity, they stake out a claim to be doing more than autobiographical work (Spickard, Landres, and McGuire 2002).

Autoethnography pushes these boundaries to include a greater level of autobiographical data collection and reflective analysis than would have been previously thought acceptable. However, the same arguments for the legitimacy of ethnography as scholarship would still seem to apply. Moreover, as, is exemplified in Latham's piece, the detailed personal reflections, situated in the larger context of the relevant historical cultural studies and trends, gives us rich insights into the way in which gender socialization and gender norms function in this subculture.

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## **JCQ and Its Historical-Cultural Context**

I have argued that, by the end of the twentieth century, the strict essentialist gendered binary that characterizes conservative American Protestantism (and gives shape to “culture war” battles) had become the subculture’s central marker of identity, the proxy for the other concerns (Ingersoll 2003).

Despite the default presumption that women’s equality has expanded in a relatively consistent manner over time (an assumption embedded in the very labelling of opponents of women’s equality as “traditionalist”), the twentieth century saw drastic pendulum swings in gender ideology. In the 1920s staunchly fundamentalist institutions such as Moody Bible Institute trained women for the pastorate, and the list of celebrity evangelists included women such as Aimee Semple McPherson and Kathryn Kuhlman. Margaret Bendroth and other historians have argued that limits on roles for women have ebbed and flowed within conservative Protestantism following those in the larger culture (Bendroth 1993). Indeed, in the latter half of the twentieth century, the broader evangelical movement was transformed by its very own feminist movement, moving away from hard interpretations of women’s submission in favour of softer forms and even what the biblical feminists (sometimes also called evangelical feminists) labelled mutual submission.

But, at the same time as huge swaths of American evangelicalism embraced the broad principles of women’s equality, some threads within this movement doubled down on patriarchy. The 1990s saw the rise of the Quiverfull and Biblical Patriarchy movements, which emphasized women’s primary roles as wives and mothers in submission to male authority and advocated the rejection of the use of contraception even within marriage and the “welcoming” of as many children as God chooses to give a couple (Joyce 2009). Quiverfull and Biblical Patriarchal families see homeschooling as the biblical approach to the education of children (keeping education as the sole responsibility of families). And it’s within this corner of the evangelical world that Latham’s story is situated; what she describes as her “lived experiences within a particular religious culture that heavily promoted a literal interpretation of scripture, including but not limited to scriptures pertaining to gender roles” (Latham, “Fundamental Femininity in Performance,” this issue, page TBD, note 2).

### **Analysis**

What was it like growing up in a religious community, so focused on the “correct” performance of an impossible gender identity? Latham explores this, and the implicit paradoxes, as she reflects on her Christian summer camp experiences. Boys and girls segregated for swimming, sexual “purity” prized above all else, perhaps humility being second. Latham writes of the pain inherent in efforts to live up to impossible, even contradictory, standards; her “never ending effort to achieve the ideal of Christ-like femininity . . . compliant though strong . . . humble though poised and confident, beautiful though unaware of such” (Latham, “Jesus Camp Queen,” this issue, page TBD).

While Latham thinks of these standards as the result of “literal” interpretation of scripture, I’d contend otherwise. I don’t doubt that the community taught that they took the bible literally, but I’d argue that this is a rhetorical move intended to legitimize certain readings of scripture rather than an accurate description of those readings. I’d argue that the standards to which she was subjected are cultural constructions designed to serve the interests of the tradition; that literal readings are actually impossible. Her community may have taken literally the command that wives must submit to

husbands, but they did not (apparently) take literally the similar command that all Christians should submit to one another. They (apparently) did not take literally the commands that women should avoid concern about hairstyles and jewellery, or that singleness is preferable to marriage and family. Nor did they take literally the assertion that in Christ there is no male or female.

The highlight of the camp experience was the crowning of the camp homecoming court and its queen in a beauty pageant of sorts, the culmination of the balancing of the paradoxes. In one particularly illustrative section, Latham writes about her extensive and focused efforts over the years to position herself to be voted queen:

Future homecoming queens never appeared at breakfast without makeup or with too much makeup. Future homecoming queens attended church regularly, promptly, and sat in a pew well-situated to be seen from all parts of the college church. Future homecoming queens occasionally, but not too often, travelled the long aisles of said church to pray publicly at an altar about some spiritual matter. In sum, future homecoming queens took up very little space, were no trouble at all to have around, and were nice to look at. (Latham, “Jesus Camp Queen,” this issue, page TBD)

But as the last line hints, the performance of gender in the context of these conflicting demands takes a personal toll. Like many of the women I write about in my own work, Latham’s world crashed, her marriage failed, and terrible tragedy followed.

What I don’t think I saw when I first did that ethnographic work years ago was the way in which the inevitable failure to live up the ideals of Christian womanhood (even for one adept enough at it to be made Christian royalty) functions as an essential part of the production and reproduction of evangelicalism itself. Evangelicalism is a conversionist tradition. By that I mean that the very heart of what the tradition teaches is necessary to be an “authentic” Christian is the experience of recognition of oneself as completely lost in sin, destined for eternal damnation, the only solution for which is the experience of true repentance. This works well for first generation converts but has always presented a problem when those converts raise their children within the tradition, usually carefully protected from the very experiences necessary for conversion. The result is the development of cultural practices and interpretive rhetorical mechanisms that set inevitably unattainable standards. Inevitable failure creates the perceived need for the very thing the tradition has to offer: the opportunity for repentance and conversion.

*Jesus Camp Queen* is a powerful story of one woman’s experience of this process, the dissonance it can create, and the costs of shattering the tiara.

## References

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