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Book Review

Baby, You Are My Religion: Women, Gay Bars, and Theology Before Stonewall

by Marie Cartier

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Borg's sketch provides an accessible starting point that is valuable for distinguishing between the Jesus of traditional imagination (the "post-Easter" Jesus) and Jesus as he lived in real space and time (the historical Jesus). Although at times it may not be entirely thorough or balanced, this popular-level depiction of the historical Jesus seems especially valuable as a centrist model for an interreligious or interfaith audience. Its multicultural orientation is able to sustain several variations on its primary themes across a wide swathe of topoi—mysticism, healing, exorcism, teaching, prophecy, politics. This portrait is one that might appeal most to an audience with no strong institutional or personal investment in the traditional Jesus, but that remains interested in mystical phenomenology and holistic spiritual praxis.

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***Baby, You Are My Religion:
Women, Gay Bars, and Theology Before Stonewall***
Marie Cartier
New York: Routledge, 2013. 224 pages.
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\$39.95

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A bar and a church may seem like improbable allies, but in *Baby, You Are My Religion: Women, Gay Bars, and Theology Before Stonewall*, that is just what they turn out to be. In this history of LGBT oppression in

America from the 1940s to the 1980s, Marie Cartier reminds us that before the 1969 Stonewall riots, the gay bar was the only social space that allowed lesbians to be themselves, and makes a compelling case that it was a space where theology was done.

Through a series of in-depth interviews Cartier provides historical, sociological, and theological contexts in which to understand the struggles of American lesbians before Stonewall. Because they deviated from “normal” feminine nature, lesbians were typically treated as mentally ill or as social extremists. Institutionalization, torture, and even rape were used as corrective treatments in an attempt to compel them to lead customary heterosexual lives. Marginalized by straight society, Cartier’s interviewees discuss how the gay bar became a place of refuge. *Baby, You Are My Religion* makes a compelling case that the American gay bar during this era was a social space where theology was conducted: “Theology must take into account gay bar culture—the pre-Stonewall people with no public space provided for them other than the bar” (p. 40). Cartier shows how the gay bar served as a sacred place where members of the lesbian community conducted marriages and constructed their own social identities. It was the only place where they were not automatically cast as evil. This book makes an essentially theological argument: lesbians visited gay bars in the hope of finding salvation.

Cartier dedicates a chapter to each decade and thereby situates the lesbian community and the gay bar in their proper historical context. In the late 1940s and 50s, homosexual acts were criminalized in the United States. During this period homosexuality was often thought of as the maladjusted inversion of heterosexual gender norms: lesbians act like men and gay men act like women. Lesbians and gays were vilified as evil because they contradicted their physiology and thereby violated natural law. According to the interviewees, the 1950s were worst decade for lesbians: “The real crime in the 1950’s,” we learn from one 67-year-old Jewish lesbian, “was being a “fag”” (p. 70). Outside the gay bar lesbians and lesbianism were either ignored or reviled, but inside they found

affirmation. Subsequent decades brought improvement, first gradually and then rapidly. The 1960s saw a cultural renewal of renewed appreciation for freedom of expression that produced a more tolerant social climate, yet even then most lesbians were still forced to live double lives, disguising themselves as heterosexuals in order to keep their families and their jobs. The 70s witnessed sweeping social change as the modern feminist movement came of age, as homosexuality was declassified as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association, making new alliances between mainstream and feminist lesbians possible.

This book effectively demonstrates how categorical intersections of race, class, and gender registered within the lesbian community during this forty-year period. Readers learn that the gay bar provided a safe space for most lesbians—though not all—in which to socialize. For example, several interviews indicate that the gay community did not always give its support to non-white lesbians. Butch women tell how they were kicked out of lesbian feminist meetings for being too masculine. Similarly, less affluent lesbians tell how they were mistreated by police officers while their more affluent sisters were not.

Cartier argues that liberation theology is implicit in the culture of the gay bar—creating a space for gays and lesbians to congregate made it possible for their developing communities to reflect on their places in society. At the end of her book the author proposes a technical term to identify *the sacred discourse of the pre-Stonewall gay bar*: “*Theology* is a non-hierarchical religion that witnesses the presence of God without an intermediary and sees God in each other. It is a religion of community... *Theology* was practiced by all women in all religions who entered the bar with the hope of salvation, being baptized as friends even though they were homosexual” (p. 196). Widely branded as sinners, American lesbians experienced a kind of divine redemption through friendships forged at their local gay bar. Seeking themselves, they found each other, and thereby became witnesses to God’s presence.

Cartier persuasively argues that much of the groundwork for the success of the contemporary gay liberation movement was done in gay bars before the watershed event of Stonewall. *Baby, You Are My Religion* is an engaging contribution to the historical study of the lesbian experience in America, and is a must-read for anyone interested in the intersection of theology and cultural studies.

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The Bible Doesn't Say That: 40 Biblical Mistranslations, Misconceptions, and Other Misunderstandings.

Joel Hoffman

New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2016. 304 pages.

ISBN-13: 978-1250059482

\$25.99

In *The Bible Doesn't Say That: 40 Biblical Mistranslations, Misconceptions, and Other Misunderstandings* Joel Hoffman, a linguist by training, brings his expertise to bear on the subject of errant Bible interpretation for a popular audience. The author promises to take his reader into a journey into “the Bible itself, stripped of its later interpretations, the biases from agenda-laden theologians, the distortions of both accidental and purposeful mistranslations, and the various impacts of history” (11). Hoffman attempts to bring the tools of contemporary historical-critical scholarship and linguistic theory to a wide range of topics, from the *bereshit* of Genesis 1, the crucifixion of Jesus, and the themes of violence and justice in the Bible, organized for consideration in forty