

Jesus among the drag queens

## **Those who are offended by the Opening Ceremonies tableau should take another look at their New Testaments.**

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Source image: @olympics / X

On Friday, the world watched as Paris put on an extravagant Opening Ceremony to kick off the 2024 Olympics. Showcasing a variety of French culture, the performances ranged from opera and ballet to heavy metal and hip hop. Reviews were mixed, running the gamut from calling the show wacky and kitschy to dazzling and spirited. Most agreed, though, the spectacle of the entire thing was impossible to peel away from.

Days later, people are still talking about the ceremony—but probably not for the reason that Thomas Jolly, artistic director of the event, had hoped.

Toward the end of the ceremony, the camera captured a group of about 18 people gathered together on one side of a fashion runway. At the center of the group was a woman in a blue dress and silver headdress, and flanking her on both sides was a diverse ensemble of performers, including drag queens from *Drag Race France*. Regardless of the intentions of the director, the imagery of the tableau—the halo-like silver headdress of the host, the long table, even the placement of the performers—evoked for many Christians Leonardo da Vinci’s painting of the Last Supper. The Olympic Committee has since acknowledged and expressed regret that people felt offended by the opening ceremony. They also insisted the tableau was inspired by [\*The Feast of the Gods, a 17th century painting by Dutch artist Jan Harmensz van Biljert\*](#) that hangs in the Magnin Museum in eastern France. But once a few prominent figures attacked the “Drag Last Supper,” the idea was canonized.

Within minutes, Elon Musk, CEO of X, formerly known as Twitter, posted that the tableau was “extremely disrespectful to Christians.” Kansas City Chiefs kicker, Harrison Butker, who made waves in May after delivering a commencement address at Benedictine College that many believed was sexist, posted a clip of the tableau underneath a passage from Galatians that said “Be not deceived: God is not mocked.” The next day, Mike Johnson, Republican Speaker of the House, seemed to agree with Butker: “Last night’s mockery of the Last Supper was shocking and insulting to Christian people around the world,” he wrote, adding, perhaps predictably, that the “war on faith knows no bounds.” Musk’s followup tweets reinforced this idea when he accused Christianity of becoming “toothless,” and claimed that without “bravery ... Christianity will perish.” Taken together, the criticism of the alleged Drag Supper sounds like a call to arms.

Which is certainly astonishing given that the Last Supper is a testament to Jesus’ commitment to peace in the midst of a violent empire. Jesus was remembered for commanding his followers to offer their left cheeks to those in power, to bless those who curse them, to lay down their swords. Jesus doesn’t need or want his disciples to defend themselves or him. (And with good reason: when they do try to defend Jesus, like Peter did during Jesus’s arrest, they fail terribly.) Neither does God need defending. In fact, it’s God who is the defender: God is on standby to rescue from the hand of the powerful all of those who have been crushed—including drag queens and other queer folks.

For the past few years, some politicians in the US have manufactured a war between Christianity and drag queens. From proposed laws banning drag shows on the

grounds of indecency to outrage over drag queens reading to children at libraries, these politicians and their supporters have sent the message that drag is somehow at odds with the gospel. Drag queens have been talked about—and many of them would disagree with this assessment—as if they were the new enemies of Christianity. But this is where the story of the Last Supper can begin to work on us.

Jesus came into a world where codes of honor and shame organized and maintained interpersonal relationships. Jesus was consistently remembered, by friends and enemies alike, for his table-sharing practices, his habit of dining with people from different walks of life, from religious leaders to tax collectors. It was Jesus' habit of eating with sinners, what the Jewish Annotated New Testament calls the "socially derogated," that is consistently remembered throughout the gospels. (It's important to note that while many of these folks might have followed Jesus' advice and repented of their sins, this was not a requirement for joining the table in the first place.) Whether the Last Supper happened exactly the way it's narrated, it seems like the stories are crafted to remind us of the huge role that Jesus' peculiar table-fellowship practices played in his ministry. In other words, when we think of the Last Supper, we should remember that Jesus likes eating with people who we would probably look down on.

These practices cohere with the big picture Jesus painted of God's kingdom: the last shall be first, the outcast shall be given priority, the previously marginalized shall be given the first pour of Veuve. In the topsy-turvy kingdom that Jesus is crazy about, all bets are off. There are going to be people feasting at God's table that you really just don't want to be there. The only person you should expect to be seated next to you in God's kingdom is the person you least expected to be there. Let's be honest: she'll probably be just as shocked to see you there.

What this means for the drag culture wars is that Christians—who have been commanded to love and bless their enemies, who are called to follow in the footsteps of the one who opened God's table to everyone—should stop worrying about who's at the Lord's table and just pull up a chair. When they do, they might discover that the very drag queens they're afraid of can offer them helpful, fresh ways of approaching their Christian faith, beginning with Scripture.

The Bible, after all, invites us to think about God and Jesus with a little help from subversive clothing. Here are a few brief examples. From the announcement that Jesus would be wrapped in swaddling clothes to his burial garments, the gospel

writers want us to pay attention to Jesus' clothing. His wardrobe is a clue about who he is. Think of the hemorrhaging woman in Luke 8. She's healed when she grabs the fringe of Jesus' garment. When Jesus feels some of his power leak out of him, he asks his disciples, "Who touched me?" Not his clothes, but *me*—the point being that the clothing is an integral aspect of Jesus' person. Who he is has something to do with what he wears—or rather *whom* he wears.

Not only does Jesus want us to pay attention to his clothes; he wants his followers to pay attention to their clothes. "Take nothing for your journey," Jesus instructs his disciples, as he prepares them to proclaim the Kingdom of God, "not even an extra tunic." New Testament scholars have pointed out how peculiar this instruction would have been in the ancient world, since nudity existed on a spectrum. It's possible that if a body were seen publicly in an undergarment, it could have been construed as naked. At the very least, it would've looked out of place, perhaps even shameful. That Jesus was dressed this way is significant. Historian Joan E. Taylor has concluded that "Jesus was considered dishonorable in terms of his appearance," and that "he apparently did not care about this, and asked his disciples not to care either."

So Jesus' identity was constructed and communicated in part by clothing that was seen to serve a subversive, countercultural function.

And this is different from drag ... *how?*

Drag queens send up gender by overperforming it in unexpected ways. This is precisely what Jesus does with gendered divinity—he flamboyantly performs a shocking version of God in order to dethrone hypermasculinized, violent, patriarchal notions of deity. Unlike earthly emperors, the God that Jesus performs, that Jesus wears, does not cling to power; he gives it up. He isn't in cahoots with the wealthy; his eye is on those who can't ever repay him. He doesn't rule with the threat of death; he promises life. He doesn't ride triumphantly into Jerusalem on a horse, but on a donkey—talk about a campy mockery of Roman power!

And of course his table practices were another sendup of the prevailing culture. Contrary to the expectations of the honor/shame culture around him, Jesus welcomed the opportunity to share a meal with people whose personal lives were the talk of the town. I don't know that there were drag queens at any of those tables, but I am positive that if Jesus were to show up today at an important, televised banquet, both Speaker Johnson and I would be shocked, probably for very different reasons, at the group of diners he called together to celebrate God's

abundance.