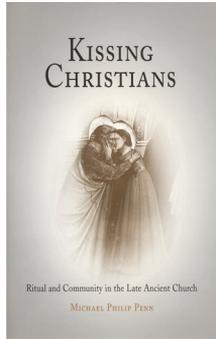


## ○ REVIEW OF MICHAEL PHILIP PENN'S *KISSING CHRISTIANS*

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Timothy J. Lang reviews Michael Philip Penn's *Kissing Christians: Ritual and community in the late ancient church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).



‘A kiss is just a kiss...’ Herman Hupfeld may have penned this tune, John Lennon may have hummed it and Louis Armstrong may have growled it, but according to Michael Philip Penn a kiss is never just a kiss. Penn’s new book, *Kissing Christians: Ritual and community in the late ancient church*, examines the social function of the ritual kiss through the first five centuries of the Christian Church. Though other smaller studies have considered the ritual kiss (see especially articles by William Klassen) and at least one major dissertation exists on the issue (Edward Phillips’ 1992 University of Notre Dame dissertation), Penn’s project is the most comprehensive and theoretically informed work to date.

Penn establishes the distinctiveness of his study by focusing on the *role* of the kiss in relation to emerging social boundaries and the *function* of the kiss as a ritual/performative action with ideological, rhetorical and hegemonic import. Thus, where previous studies limit attention to the historical and theological origins of the kiss (cf. Klassen) or trace the evolution of the kiss throughout the Church’s liturgy (cf. Phillips), Penn aims toward an interdisciplinary, theoretically oriented approach that focuses on group cohesion and social boundaries.

The first chapter – ‘Kissing basics’ – begins by examining the gesture of the kiss in its Greco-Roman context. Though Penn – having culled around a thousand references – finds great diversity regarding the kiss in non-Christian sources, nearly 40 percent of the references to kissing occur in an erotic context. The next most numerous group of references (about 25 percent) place the kiss in the context of the Roman *familia*. This latter context is the most relevant for Penn’s study since Christians, often troubled by problems related to the eroticism of the kiss, generally emphasised the familial connotations of the ritual kiss.

The second section of this chapter takes up this very issue by adumbrating the development of the Christian ritual kiss. Penn eschews interest in the theological origins of the Christian kiss – a nearly impossible question – and instead focuses on the variegated uses and articulations of the ritual; by the fourth century, one finds the kiss occurring throughout the Church’s liturgy in

prayer, greetings, Eucharist, baptism, ordination, funerals, vows, penitence, martyrdom and so on.

The most important discussion in this first chapter is the issue of *ritualisation*. Penn borrows this term from Catherine Bell's work, *Ritual theory, ritual practice*. According to Bell, a ritual begins to take form as a common gesture becomes distinguished from its common social function. Thus, in the case of the Christian kiss *ritualisation* occurs as the act (kissing) is distinguished from and invested with meaning beyond its everyday occurrence. The relationship of this Christian ritual to its common, non-Christian setting is especially important for Penn. He criticises previous studies for failing to relate the Christian kiss to its foundation as a common gesture: 'Each Christian strategy of differentiation interacted with the kiss's larger cultural context. The diversity of ancient kissing practices provided both an opportunity for and a challenge to its use as an early Christian ritual' (17). Thus, as a multivalent symbol, the kiss could not (and cannot) be evaluated from some Archimedean point; rather, as a ritualised gesture, it required ongoing and creative differentiation from its cultural context.

Having sketched the social contours of kissing in the Greco-Roman context and traced the trajectories of the kiss as Christian ritual, chapter two – 'The kiss that binds: Christian communities and group cohesion' – introduces the aspect of the ritual kiss that Penn finds most important: its function in establishing/increasing group cohesion. According to Penn, the kiss helped to increase social cohesiveness in four primary ways: 1. it was seen to establish and enact the Church as a 'new family'; 2. it was understood as binding souls together through pneumatological exchange; 3. it functioned as a ritual of reconciliation in situations of discord or estrangement; and, 4. as a unification of physical bodies, it tacitly symbolised and focally portrayed the social body as a unified entity.

In this chapter, Penn draws theoretical models primarily from the social-scientific work of Mary Douglas and Michael Hogg. Penn departs from the idea that cohesion is simply a function of how much individuals in a group like each other; rather, for Penn, cohesion (or 'strong group' in Douglas' work) relates to the degree of conformity to set prototypes or norms. Thus, even if discord exists within a group, the cohesion may remain strong if the group retains a strong sense of its members 'fitting in' over against outsiders who do not. The ritual kiss functions in this social attraction model as a performed action that both defines and creates cohesion – simultaneously presenting and reinforcing a prototype of social unity.

Penn highlights this last issue – the performative aspect of the ritual kiss – at various points in his study. With scattered references to scholars such as M.E. Combs-Schilling, Joachim Knuf and Jonathan Z. Smith, Penn emphasises that, as a performed act, the participants are made both audience and actors in the particular realisation of a social ideal. Therefore, though the ritual kiss is a symbolised performance of an ideal social unity, its participants are in fact wrapped up in a realisation of the ideal. Penn writes, '[w]hen they saw the exchange of the kiss, Christians witnessed a specific scene that their behavior should model – joining together to form a family in Christ... When practiced, the kiss made concrete a particular social ideal' (36–37).

Naturally, a chapter on the social binding function of the kiss is followed by one examining the role of the kiss in creating difference and distinction. Penn's third chapter – 'Difference and distinction: The exclusive kiss' – discusses the dynamics in which the ritual kiss created boundaries of exclusion. The chapter begins by recalling Jonathan Smith and Pierre Bourdieu's observations on the inviolable relationship between identity and difference (the chief import being that identity

is strongest where difference is most obvious). Thus, a community's identity depends upon its ability to distinguish itself from the 'other'. This battle for definitional clarity grows most kinetic in situations where otherness is less pronounced. Therefore, the 'near-other' poses the greatest threat to identity's integrity and is generally the source of the most pronounced conflict.

The 'exclusive kiss' functioned in this dialogue of difference and identity as a visible marker of inclusion/exclusion and a ritual act through which an individual traversed the boundary between outsider and insider. Thus, for the early Church the kiss became both an initiatory and definitional rite. As an initiatory rite, it was employed to bring catechumens into the ranks of the baptised. Definitionally, the kiss was used to distinguish Christians from pagans ('not Christian'), Jews ('too closely Christian') and heretics ('falsely claiming to be Christian'). However, it was also employed in later centuries to distinguish and create internal hierarchies. Thus, the kiss formed boundaries between men and women and clergy and laity.

I found two issues in this chapter most interesting. First, though Penn does not explicitly develop the argument, his discussion regarding the concern in early Christian literature for distinguishing between Jewish and Christian kissing lends tacit support to the case being advanced by Daniel Boyarin (and others) that the 'break' between Judaism and Christianity is less clean and much later than generally supposed. Second, his observations on the late 4th or 5th century prohibition against cross-gendered kissing helpfully illustrate the role the body and physicality play as vital rhetorical forces. Dependent upon Michel Foucault, he writes:

Although commands in church orders prohibiting men and women from kissing played a part in the process, the actual practice was continually inscribed on the participants' bodies; every week Christian men kissed only other men, and women other women. Such practices became normalized: the specific kissing behavior became the ideal. Participants' bodies reenacted and internalized what formally was an oral or written prohibition. Ritual participants no longer were simply objects of their regulations, they were coauthors (89).

Penn's final chapter – 'Boundary violations: Purity, promiscuity, and betrayal' – is the most broadly theoretical and creative in the book: in this chapter Mr. Penn departs most ambitiously from previous studies and finds the greatest payoff from his interdisciplinary efforts. Having in the previous two chapters examined the role of the kiss in boundary formation – a formative process involving simultaneous centripetal and centrifugal impulses – this final chapter deals with the problem of violation. We have learned how the boundary is formed; now, what happens when it is violated? And, what effect does the violation have on the identities involved and the boundary itself?

In this chapter Penn leans on the work of Foucault and Douglas. Extending Foucault's critique of the 'repressive hypothesis' from *The history of sexuality*, Penn considers how the erotic overtones of the kiss were transformed by Christians – rather than simply repressed. Taking his cue from Douglas' work (especially *Purity and danger*), Penn discusses the relationship between dirt (or contamination) and the social system that makes dirt possible; purity and pollution only, yet necessarily, exist within a functioning social order. Therefore, though the kiss helped to enforce order (purity), it could also transmit disorder (pollution).

Especially helpful in this final chapter is Penn's attack on the so-called 'rumor hypothesis'. Penn traces the pervasive opinion in scholarship that Christian kissing led to widespread accusations of immorality or licentiousness from pagan outsiders. The first problem with this assumption is simply that it is an assumption; there are no extant references to rumors or slanders. The second problem is that the assumption leads scholars to imagine the development of the kiss as one intentionally and inevitably tied to a process of de-eroticisation. Penn, in contrast, argues that the understanding of ritual kiss among Christians was forged not through a repression of erotic overtones but through dialogue with the erotic connotations. For example, Athenagoras, in his *Plea for Christians*, discusses how Christian kissing demonstrates the supreme virtue of Christians in terms of sexual self-control. Thus, the sexual nature of the kiss is not repressed but re-employed.

As I hope the tone of this review has intimated, *Kissing Christians* is a well-conceived, critically mature and smartly executed analysis of the ritual kiss. What criticisms I have are slight. On occasion, the transitions between sections appear awkward, and the relation of ancillary arguments within a chapter to the whole of the chapter is not always apparent. Only in a few instances did I find the data marshaled for an argument insufficient, conclusions tenuous or assertions unfounded – and these cases are not worth mentioning. Though the book is relatively short (126 pages), it feels repetitive at times. There are only so many different ways to explain how boundary divisions both bind and exclude. Furthermore, some information – such as the character of kissing in the Greco-Roman world – is repeated across chapters to an unnecessary degree. Thus, though the book is already quite brief, it could easily become even shorter. In fact, if one did not wish to wade through all the textual analysis, one could merely read the introduction and conclusion to the book along with the conclusions of each chapter and get the general gist of the argument.

Despite these minor quibbles, *Kissing Christians* is a valuable addition to the history of early Christianity and a useful model for future interdisciplinary projects.

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