

Women as Witness:
Gender and Participation in
Encounters

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We do not see Nicola Green in *Encounters*. She is behind the camera as she documents interfaith meetings; witnessing, shaping, framing, but never visible. Not only is Green absent, other women are only occasionally present in the gatherings she photographs. This essay will explore the binaries of visibility/invisibility and outsider/insider in reference to Green's work. It will question what effect, if any, her physical presence as a woman has on these encounters and the photographs that she produces. Is Green working within a biblical trope of woman as witness, observer, and supporter? Or, alternatively, does her role as photographer challenge this assumption by establishing her not only as an active participant but also as the deliverer of the images we see?

From biblical times to the present day, women have often been placed 'outside of the frame' of religious spectacles and events (Raphael 66). Throughout the Hebrew Bible, New Testament and Qur'an, where women have featured, they are mostly represented as conforming to certain categories of woman, one of these being witness. This phenomenon is perhaps unsurprising when we consider how many of these texts have historically been written and preserved by men. However, the impact of such constructions of women as inactive or uninvolved in religion cannot be ignored. Even in significant moments such as the Crucifixion, anonymous women are acknowledged but isolated from the action they are ostensibly supporting: 'And there were also some women watching from a distance ... these women followed him and served him' (Mk. 15:40-1). As a result, women can appear superfluous in biblical narrative, and often individuals and their



Fig. 8.1. Assisi, 2011



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stories are generalised into representatives of their 'types', be it mother, slave, temptress or otherwise (Brenner-Idan 87). Scholars such as Amina Wadud argue that in Islam the separation of genders is less rooted in the text and more of an inherited social custom (152). In textual examples and conservative religious congregations, however, female believers have been largely reduced to incidental spectators and are very rarely active participants in the events described.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza describes the Bible as a 'text which either marginalizes women and other non-persons or which eliminates them altogether from the literary record' (35). This could be a result of laws or expectations set out for these groups, or their relative invisibility or passivity in narratives that directly involve them. The story of the so-called Hospitality of Abraham epitomises this tendency, as featured in the Hebrew Bible (Gen. 18:1–15), New Testament (Heb. 13:1–2) and Qur'an (51:24–30). According to the Hebrew Bible, after the arrival of three strangers to Abraham's home, his wife Sarah is immediately sent away: 'And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes"' (Gen. 18:6). Meanwhile, the conversation that takes place between the four men concerns her body: 'Then one said, "your wife Sarah shall have a son"' (Gen. 18:10). Sarah herself is conspicuously absent in the meeting until the very end. This is where, according to the Qur'an, she first appears: 'His wife then entered with a loud cry, struck her face, and said, "A barren old woman?"' (51:29). In both versions, during the conversation Sarah positions herself at the entrance of the tent where the men are gathered, listening in and witnessing this mystical encounter but making no immediate physical or verbal interventions.

Fig. 8.2. Bangalore, 2010

This is a pattern we consistently see with women in religious texts, even for two of the most fully formed female characters in the Hebrew Bible: Sarah and Hagar, her so-called handmaiden. Despite being renowned in Judaism, Islam and Christianity – with countless artworks and commentaries devoted to them – they remain virtually mute throughout their narratives (Levine 89). The absence of women in biblical texts can appear shocking to contemporary readers, whose assumptions may be guided by the enormous presence of biblical women in the canon of Christian art. The famous depictions of Mary Magdalene, the Virgin Mary, Eve, Judith, Susanna, etc., give a misleading sense of presence when of the ninety-three women who speak in the Bible, only forty-nine of them are even named (Freeman 4).

Nicola Green explores the idea of invisibility and anonymity in *The Encounter Series*, which features portraits of prominent religious leaders. The blank faces, which are hand-painted by the artist, deliberately obscure the individual identity of her sitters whilst the elaborate and colourful backgrounds are emblazoned with symbols associated with their faith. In this series, it could be argued that the removal of the face signifies the role of a religious leader as representative of their whole community. Green has removed the individual personality from the piece, rendering their gender, expression and age unintelligible. The viewer is left with the gestures of the figures (which are also explored in *The Light Series* as well as in the iconography in the background). The sitter, along with these objects and patterns, becomes a symbol of their faith much like they do in the interreligious gatherings they attend.

As an observer, Green is placed on the periphery of the interfaith meetings she documents. Her position is one that is looking in and witnessing, and the trace of her presence, or any other woman for that matter, is minimal. In all the private audiences she attended, and a large majority of the public ones, Green was the only woman in the room (Green personal interview). Upon viewing her images of faith leaders, some viewers may not notice this imbalance of genders immediately, although so many people have been brought up without questioning this imbalance in general that it might remain hidden in plain sight to some. Instead of representing women in the meeting, Green is made an 'honorary male' for the occasion. Abigail Solomon-Godeau argues that there is an existing 'presumption of a universal male photographer and a universal male spectator' where the term 'spectator' implies that the spectacle is enacted for the male viewer's benefit; they are the reason for and the beneficiary of the events photographed (7).

The assumed male photographer and spectator adopts the position of the 'insider' in these interactions, with unquestioned participation and privileged knowledge. The female photographer (in a sort of mirror image of the female religious leader) is an exception relegated to the 'outsider' position; 'an alienated and voyeuristic relationship that heightens the distance between subject and object' (Solomon-Godeau 49). If a female photographer is 'voyeuristic', the implication is that her presence is not wanted, or her gaze is not appropriate. Nicola Green's outsider status is, however, not purely limited to her gender or role as photographer or artist. In an interfaith setting, where multiple truths and realities live side by side, she is not clearly identified with any

of them (Lizardy-Hajbi 53). Although she is present for the significant encounters between Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa and former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey, Pope Benedict's visit to the UK and Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' meeting with Pope Francis amongst many others, she is not directly involved in the meetings and her own faith was generally assumed to match the group she accompanied to the meeting (Green personal interview), thus absorbing the identities of the men around her rather than being an individual in her own right.

As a woman and as a silent observer of the meetings, Green was on the outside of the interfaith encounter in multiple respects. The artist explicitly wished to remain as 'invisible' and minimally invasive as possible during the assemblies (Green personal interview). This may in part be due to her deliberate neutrality on the contents of the conversations she documented, but it also suggests she was striving for an impartial representation of her subjects. The late photographer and theorist Alan Sekula described the camera as 'an engine of fact ... independent of human practice' (56). This documentary-based definition of photography could well apply to the aims of a commissioned, official portrait photographer of religious leaders. However, Green is none of these things. As a woman, a Christian, and an artist, her identity is inextricably linked to the work that she makes. The art theorist Margaret Olin argues that many factors influence how we view an image. This also applies to taking photographs as 'the personal and social lens through which the beholder is looking can bring what she or he sees into focus, or distort it beyond recognition' depending on their own ability to identify with their subject (99). If the act of looking



Fig. 8.3. Lambeth Palace, 2013



is indeed this subjective, then Green's apparent identity as an outsider must be significant in our interpretation of the images she makes. Her personal perspective is just as integral to the image as the mechanics of her camera.

What may be less apparent for a beholder of Green's work is how far these meetings were impacted and altered by her presence, both as a woman and as an artist. Whether the act of photographing another person is invasive or not is highly contested. Susan Sontag argues in her seminal text *On Photography* that 'the whole point of photographing people is that you are not intervening in their lives, only visiting them' (41). However, she suggests earlier in the text that the photographer is an aggressive figure who violates their subjects (14). Green has explored this notion in her work before. The fifth image of her *In Seven Days...* series, *Fear* (2010), depicts an anonymous photographer pointing an extended lens directly at the viewer. The photographer's

Ill. 23. *Day 5 Fear, In Seven Days...* 2010

Ill. 24. *In Seven Days...* 2010

face is obscured and faded, with red gloves and a photorealistic image of the camera lens being the only details that are highlighted. The figure personifies how Green saw most of the press and news photographers on Barack Obama's campaign trail. She saw their disregard for space and privacy as dehumanising, whilst the sheer number and persistence of the photographers was intimidating. As an artist who uses photography in her practice, it is interesting to question how she reconciles this view of photography with her own use of it. How does the artist employ these tools without becoming one of the faceless lens operators she depicts in *Fear*? Green commented that she sees photographs as more intrusive than the sketches she also did of the encounters she attended, as they had the potential to affect the encounter greatly. She attempted to avoid this and the distraction of a constantly clicking camera by using a small, relatively cheap digital camera and only photographing when she felt she was able to, and that it was appropriate. The bigger the camera, the artist has explained, the more it becomes about the end result of the photo and the artist's position as the witness. She felt the project was not as much about focusing on the photo and being stuck behind the camera as it was about quickly capturing a moment whilst having as minimal an impact as possible on the encounter.

The artist acknowledges that while the photos and drawings she produced ultimately formed the primary basis of the artwork, she maintains that they were very much a means to an end (Green personal interview). Furthermore they could be said to demonstrate her desire not to intrude, to 'just visit', in Sontag's words. Whilst a reluctance to intervene could be mistaken for a passivity or reticence associated historically with women, the trust and respect she cultivated formed the basis of Green's relationships with her subjects and was therefore key to the project's entire existence. The idea of her being invisible in the encounter had not initially occurred to the artist and she confesses that she had not fully considered the implications of her being a woman whilst having this unprecedented access to exclusive and predominantly male spaces. However, her 'visiting' of these events gave her a unique and disembodied perspective rather like that of the 'angels' that visit Abraham in the biblical episode recounted at the start of this essay. In Hebrew, the word *malach* means both angel and messenger. This is mirrored in Islam and Christianity where angels act as intermediaries between God and his subjects. In a sense, Green also takes on an intermediary role *qua* artist, delivering images and messages from religious leaders to the viewing public.

Green's sense of purpose in her art has been very strong from the beginning. In *In Seven Days...*, she commented that she set out to be a 'witness' on behalf of her mixed race children, focusing on the importance of the Obama campaign in the long trajectory of history. Documenting and interpreting the social history of this historic occasion, Green hoped that her images could serve as a point of reference for future generations and not just as ephemeral media images. The notion of being a 'witness', rather than an active participant, is key to her work – a feature that differentiates her from other portrait artists (Green personal interview). For the *Encounters* project, it was a strong sense of wanting to witness the relatively new occurrence of public-facing interfaith meetings that led Green to contact Lambeth Palace and Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams. The mutual



trust and respect in her relationships with prominent religious figures such as Williams and Jonathan Sacks could, in part, be attributed to her desire to create an artwork rather than a news story.

Green's reluctance to have any visible presence in the meetings, or indeed in the subsequent work, could be viewed as reinforcing a model of female passivity akin to those described at the outset. On the other hand, by removing herself from the proverbial frame, Green is repositioning herself in a different role: that of the creator. Green occupied a position of power in her access to these sensitive and guarded meetings. She was trusted not to misuse this power and was privy to confidential, potentially controversial, conversations. Thus, while the artist is invisible to us, her presence alters the meeting irreversibly. Green has access to a side of her subjects that is unavailable to public and press alike. It is pertinent to consider whether she would have been granted such permissions and relied upon quite to this extent if she had been a male artist proposing the project. The invasive, greedy image of press photography is, after all, inextricably connected with masculinity and aggression. Green's position as an outsider, as a lay person, an artist, and as a woman, was not necessarily a disadvantage. In this case it bought her freedoms as well.

The same cannot always be said for women's daily, lived experience as religious subjects. Wadud reminds us that regardless of women's attendance in the mosque or the degrees of gender separation, the public prayer leader (imam) is always male in traditional services, a fact that

Fig. 8.4. The Vatican, 2011



could imply that women's presence in prayer is minor or unnecessary for worship (152). Likewise, the Catholic Church is yet to ordain women and in Orthodox Judaism ten adult *men* are required for minyan, or group prayer, reinforcing the idea that women are peripheral to worship. The persistent removal of women in biblical narratives, such as Sarah eavesdropping outside of the tent, or the female followers of Moses kept away from the holy mountain, set a physical and psychic precedent that is still present in contemporary religious practice. As Melissa Raphael contends, 'Orthodox women watch and hear Judaism through a barrier [in this case a *mechitzah* or screen in the synagogue] to the senses whose symbolic power extends beyond the sphere of worship and into the possibility of their imagination' or visibility to God (77). On the other hand, it is important not to portray even Orthodox Judaism as monolithic in this respect given efforts, for instance, to form Partnership Minyanim with women as well as men.

Similar to Raphael's example of the *mechitzah* or the leadership imbalance in some Christian churches, Wadud notes that the position of women in the mosque is separated and usually in an 'inferior place', either behind the male prayer lines or invisible to them in the congregational setting (154). It could be argued that these invisible groups are in some way watching a performance. The male congregants act out the rituals with the full knowledge they are being watched but do not acknowledge their audience, as they either cannot see them or are encouraged to act as though they cannot. Of course, these restrictions are not universal across entire religions. Different denominations and movements within a faith will have differing, even contradictory approaches to gender difference in the space of worship. Teresa Berger reflects that in Christianity alone 'Some churches have authorized rituals for the blessing of same-sex unions; some are ordaining openly transgender priests. Other churches continue to struggle with the ordination of women, [and] churches rooted in more traditional contexts maintain seating arrangements that separate women and men' (Berger). A pointed question to ask, however, is how much agency does this idea of spectatorship in sacred space afford women? Is their presence inconsequential or does it have a wider reaching effect on the experience of worship for both the 'performers' and themselves?

In the Qur'an one of God's names is 'witness' (4:166), and God is routinely described in the sacred texts and prayers of all three Abrahamic

faiths as observing and overseeing people's actions, and indeed witnessing their internal thoughts. Rachel Neis develops the notion of the spectator as a divine force. In biblical times, when the concept of monotheism was still developing, she explains, 'God's capacity to see was inversely related to the human ability to see him; God was the 'unseen seer' (Neis 155). Perhaps, then, women watching religious spectacles from invisible vantage points in a synagogue, mosque, or elsewhere take on this disembodied perspective as well; one endowed with an almost divine clarity. This comparison may seem ironic when we consider how the primary, creative function of any kind has historically been attributed to men (Delany 11). In Green's work, the dynamic is much the same. She is gazing upon her subjects: sketching, photographing them, whilst they do not engage with her. Her position of being both independent from any religious organisation and disconnected from the specific content of the meetings legitimized her objectivity, or detachment. She is behind the lens, and whilst the gaze is often conceived of as masculine, aggressive or acquisitive, and the visual object as feminine or passive, Green's gaze is unobtrusive and purposeful, like the unseen creator's (Mulvey 20).

Whilst Green is evidently not *the* creator in a religious sense, she is the creator of her work, and her act of witnessing can hardly be categorized as passive. Sekula defined artistic photography as surpassing documentary 'when it transcends its reference to the world, when the work can be regarded, first and foremost, as an act of self-expression on the part of the artists'. Green would most likely agree as she does not consider herself a photographer. Her practice is more of a 'translation' of the visual information from her camera and sketches into her finished artworks (Green personal interview). Through this process, the artist reconfigures the meetings, taking topical public events and producing works that emphasize the symbolism of interfaith dialogue and hope for a more cooperative and mutually beneficial future. Focusing on the leaders as anonymous representatives for a whole religion in *The Encounter Series*, she removes any notion of ego from her sitters. Since the individual, recognizable pioneers in the life-size figures of *The Light Series* retain their identities, the artist admits that this aesthetic distinction between the two series makes the absence of women in *The Light Series* more pointed. However, she hopes that this absence will not be accepted readily and will start conversations amongst viewers and inspire future initiatives (Green personal interview). In both collections of work, she is highlighting the



Ill. 26. *The Light Series* 2018



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importance of symbolic language, which is communicated in body language and the semiotics of the gesture just as clearly as with clothing and regalia.

The Light Series consists of twelve Perspex figures of religious leaders whom the artist witnessed in interfaith gatherings. They are a mixture of silk-screen printing and painting backed with fluorescent Perspex, which emit a different coloured natural light. The artist chose to use this technique for the first time with these pieces as she did not want to frame the images, which would create a literal barrier between them and the beholder. Although part of a series, the figures are individual works that bear no obvious relation to each other apart from the interfaith theme. Green decided not to group the pieces together when displayed as this would require her to position them and create a forced, spatialised relationship between them which was out of context (Green personal interview). The focus of this series, then, is not just about the personalities and status of the leaders depicted, but – perhaps even more importantly – the public's interaction with them. The imposing stature and photographic replication of these famous faces creates an atmosphere in which the viewer becomes more aware of their own body and how it relates to others around them. Green magnifies the gestures of her chosen subjects, encouraging her audience

Fig. 8.5. Assisi, 2011

Fig. 8.6. The Vatican, 2015

to respond and start a dialogue. The figures are diverse in their cultural backgrounds and beliefs, but all male. Nonetheless, Green is in control of the placement of the figures, including their size, shape and position. As the deliverer of these images, the power is in her hands.

The figure of woman as witness is an established biblical and religious trope that Green's work might initially appear to reinforce. However, her work in fact subverts this idea through both her methods and subject matter. Green wanted to witness interfaith meetings for posterity and to translate their gestures, symbols and optimism into art. Green had to build trusting relationships to gain access to these meetings and her intentions remained apolitical throughout the project. Her presence as a woman, however, is essential to our understanding of this work as she had a place in meetings in which very few, if any, other women could participate. Green negotiated the role of being both an insider and an outsider, visible yet invisible, as both an artist and a woman. Her unobtrusive approach located a liminal space between aggressive shooting and passive observation. Her work demonstrates and records the wider symbolic significance of the interfaith encounter outside of the specific meetings, and alongside this she leaves her own trace as a female artist. Her presence is integral and necessary to our perception of these meetings as she is the creator – the unseen seer who has created our images of them. We are exposed to *her* view of interfaith relationships as we witness *through* her, not alongside her or despite her. This work has become about far more than a series of meetings. Green delivers the viewer a message of hope and optimism for the future of interfaith relations, but she also demonstrates, first hand, that unlike in the past these new stories will not – and should not – be created, preserved and told exclusively by men.





Ill. 27. *Encounter*, Rashi 2018



Ill. 28. *Encounter*, Amber 2018