

Foreword

Gender and Religion: A Dialectical Relationship

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It is a great pleasure for me to open this issue that collects the proceedings of a doctoral seminar on ‘Gender and Religion’, organized by the EDGES PhD Curriculum in ‘Gender and Women’s Studies’, within the frame of the research project of ‘Diversity and Inclusion’ promoted by the Department of Modern Languages (LILEC). I am particularly happy to welcome as key contributor Prof. Dr. Anne-Marie Korte of the University of Utrecht, the university with which EDGES has recently established a double doctoral title. Prof. Anne-Marie Korte is an international specialist in the field. She holds the chair of Religion and Gender at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies & Department of Media and Culture Studies (Faculty of Humanities) at Utrecht University. Significantly, “the chair aims to explore categories of gender, sexuality and diversity when investigating the significance and operations of religion(s) in cultural processes and current social developments” (Korte n.d.: para. 1).

Prof. Korte is therefore the most appropriate scholar to introduce with her essay this issue of the journal. Her overview is undoubtedly of great interest for feminist scholars and experts on gender studies, since it reconstructs the history of the uneasy but, nevertheless, fruitful intertwining of these two fields of study.

I am also sincerely pleased to see that the essays of some of our brilliant EDGES PhD students, who have also been at the core of the organization of the seminar, are included here. They give us precious insights into the topics itself, but also into the outcome of their doctoral research period.

Let me point out that the topic, ‘Gender and Religion’, is a controversial and difficult one. It is enough to read seminal texts such as *Women’s Studies of the Christian and Islamic Traditions. Ancient, Medieval and Renaissance Foremothers*, edited by Kari Elisabeth Børresen and Kari Vogt (1993), or

Feminism and Religion. An Introduction by Rita M. Gross (1996), as well as *Fundamentalism and Gender* edited by John Stratton Hawley (1994), or, even, *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, edited by Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan (1996), to understand the degree of difficulty encountered in dealing with this thematic duo. I believe that this collection will contribute to shed some light and further explore the relationship between the two fields, given the multifarious perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches of the essays collected here.

Undoubtedly, the close link between religion and gender is still overlooked in most contemporary gender studies, and, yet, religion matters, and so does gender. Nowadays, both are highly challenged fields, and one may ask in what ways religion might be related to current gender debates. This question becomes even more compelling at a time, like ours, of massive migration from Islamic countries, opening up numerous concerns not just about gender equality, but, more specifically, about integration, especially in relation to women. Traditionally, these two areas of human life have been seen as opposite and conflicting, since religion has often been perceived as one of the main perpetrators of women's subjugation (see Stuart 2010). Not by chance, in 2005 the Council of Europe stated, "women's rights are often curtailed or violated in the name of religion" (Council of Europe 2005: para. 2). And it is no coincidence that "during the long struggle for women's rights, from non-discrimination to equality, religious institutions and female and feminist movements were often on opposing sides" (Giorgi 2016: 54), as Iran's ongoing women-led protests show.

Likewise, if gender studies were able to revise fields such as medicine, biology, philosophy and history, not to mention literature, religion/religions, on the contrary, seemed able to avoid being seen through gendered theoretical lenses, mostly due to the rigid hierarchical structure and patriarchal theologies that characterize many institutionalized religions. Additionally, being male dominated, religious institutions generally limit women's role within the religion in question. Nevertheless, the relationship between the two has instead been developed and widely discussed at least since the 1990s, as Prof. Korte demonstrates in her essay, with results of great interest for us. It must be recognized that, on the one hand, thanks to the different waves of feminism, we have been awakened to a new awareness of gender equity and justice, that has made us able to investigate religious patriarchal patterns and organizations and see that they often threaten the full recognition and equal participation of women. While, in order to reach full equality, women's power and position

within religion should be equivalent to men's, this is not the case in most established religions. On the other hand, in history, religion has often offered women the unique possibility to count in the public arena, providing them with an unusual agency and an individual power of speech. The women prophets of past centuries, for instance, played a decisive role in establishing a leadership among the followers of their religious sects, thereby affirming a strong female presence in religious practices and theological doctrines. One might also mention the Quaker, Unitarian or Evangelical women of the eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries who spoke in the gatherings of their communities but also to the public, fighting with vigour for human rights and universal education; or, analogously, the role played by many religious women in the transatlantic anti-slavery movements in which their voices were heard distinctively.

Hence, the past offers a great number of examples of the combination between women's appeal for human rights and religiosity. Furthermore, more recent examples still testify to such a connection. The Sixties and Seventies – the years of the so-called second wave of feminism – saw, especially in the United States but not only, the growth of New Age movements based on the Goddess Earth and theories related to the vision of primal matriarchy that affirmed “a privileged bond between women and nature” (Giorgi 2016: 57). And if, as many claim, the rise of feminism has accelerated the modern process of secularization, it could also be argued that feminism and feminisms in the plural have helped to increased human awareness of the surrounding world, creating a re-sacralization of the body, earth and nature. We might refer to the pioneering work in ecocriticism of Rachel Carson (*Silent Spring*, 1962), or, later, the ecofeminist concept of ‘the ethics of care’ first formulated by Carol Gilligan (*In a Different Voice*, 1982) and, later on, by Catriona Sandilands (*The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy*, 1999), whose ethics of care demands that ecological morality be guided by embodied and intensely felt experiences of caring for other beings. Thus, ecofeminism becomes the need to include animals and other non-human beings in the realm of moral consideration, seen in the interaction between persons, between persons and the natural world, between persons and the religious universe. Ecofeminism, then, has opened the way to an approach to the ecosystem that is not only without any hierarchical structure but also highly spiritual.

In more straightforward political terms, the relationship between gender and religion was deeply experienced by South African black feminists, who fought against the double bondage of being non-white and being female. Likewise, the Muslim world has heard, over time, individual women's voices

paving the way to change and gender awareness. Another interesting consequence of the gender and religion connection took place in the interpretation of holy texts that progressively underwent a critical re-reading when the Protestant world first opened up to a feminist perspective that shaped a new political and hermeneutical viewpoint.¹ Hence, feminist theology has developed mainly within monotheistic traditions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism), offering women's re-readings of holy texts as strategies of resistance and agency that opposed the long established tradition of gender exclusion. American black women in particular are making history in theological education, offering useful tools of protest against marginalization and exploitation. Theoretically, they are leading the worldwide 'Black Lives Matter' movement, bringing about a vigorous re-conceptualization of the relationship between race, gender and religion. So, we may say that the relationship between religion and gender does not only pertain to the past, but, on the contrary, has, as Ursula King claims, a "greater significance and concern to history in the making, to the transformation of persons and communities in the present" (King 2004: 83). Then the question that arises is: how much of this process has had only to do with an increasing secularization? We could answer with Alberta Giorgi's conclusions, according to which "the tension in the relationship between religion and women's rights is understood more as a historical contingency than an irreconcilable difference" (Giorgi 2016: 58). Besides, contemporary feminist and queer studies question not just the binary construction of gender identity but also the religious v. secular subject, introducing a different analytical perspective, based on the intersectional subject rather than binary categorizations.²

Coming to a provisional conclusion, I would like to use a quotation from King that, in my opinion, might be used as the interpretative high road to this issue and its topic. She writes:

Religions [...] offer narratives of redemption, healing, and salvation; they encompass "way-out" eschatological utopias, but also express the deepest human yearnings for wholeness and transcendence [...]. In and through all these, religions have created and legitimated gender, enforced, oppressed, and warped it, but also subverted, transgressed, transformed, and liberated

¹ See on these topics Giorgi (2016); more in general, see Woodhead (2016), and more specifically in relation to Christianity, see McLaughlin (1975).

² See, for instance, Braidotti (2008).

it. It is because of this complex interrelationship that the topic of religion and gender provides such a fascinating object of study (King 2004: 71).

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