

## Introduction

# Gender, Religion and Feminism(s): An Interdisciplinary Approach

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*Gender, Religion and Feminism(s): An Interdisciplinary Approach* stems from the international seminar dedicated to ‘Gender and Religion’, which was organized by the PhD Curriculum EDGES in ‘Women’s and Gender Studies’. This initiative took place within the thematic framework of the ‘Diversity and Inclusion’ project developed by the Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures (LILEC) of the University of Bologna. Planning such a seminar responded to a need that we literary scholars, together with our PhD students in Gender Studies, felt was essential in order to discover and understand more about categories of gender, sexuality and diversity when investigating the significance of religion(s) in cultural processes and current social development. This occasion thus gave us the opportunity to question and give voice to a vibrant cultural conversation from an interdisciplinary perspective, that explored the extent to which feminism(s) and gender analysis have been generating alternative readings of women’s agency ‘through’ and within theology and religious studies.

Gender and religion, as the debates on this topic later within this volume have convincingly demonstrated,<sup>1</sup> are rather complicated and difficult issues. Yet, as the essays collected in our volume explain, this is an ideal opportunity

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<sup>1</sup> In this volume, see Lilla Maria Crisafulli, “Gender and Religion: A Dialectical Relationship” and Anne-Marie Korte, “‘Feminist Theology’, ‘Lived Religion’ and the Investigation of Women in Conservative Religions as Changing the Agenda of the Study of Religion” on this specific topic.

to reflect on the intersection between these two apparently opposite, incompatible research areas. Religion, as Elizabeth Castelli reminds us, “often cuts across the other categories by which identities are framed and it often complicates these other categories rather than simply reinscribing them” (Castelli 2001: 5). Therefore, gender – which encompasses these categories of differentiation such as class, race, age, sexuality, and body size – and religious expressions cannot be investigated as independent variables.

There is hardly an event in history that lacked a religious component or response. In consequence, the dichotomy of gender and religion are closely intertwined areas of study, since gender roles and conduct norms are regulated in every religion. Gender is therefore strictly connected to the regulation and sustainability of different religious communities and their enduring practices. Moreover, as the same term feminism(s) (Pilche & Whelehan 2004: 48-52) employed in the title of our volume suggests, ‘feminists’ themselves have never been an exclusive and homogeneous group in either their approaches to the study of religion or their methodology, political and philosophical base. Of course, there also exists a diversity of women’s viewpoints about what feminism is or ought to be, and that the practices through which women claim themselves as feminists can be inescapably rooted in differing socio-economical, historical or geopolitical locations and situations. As key concepts at the very core of women’s and gender studies teach us (such as the situated knowledge(s) and/or politics of location),<sup>2</sup> the study of religion requires a high level of cultural insight and respect in order to avoid the imposition of Western feminist values on non-Western cultures, traditions (Mohanty 1988), and indeed religions.

It is very difficult to deny, however, that almost all religious traditions have strongly contributed to the formation of gender inequalities, which have led to the subordination of women within religious systems and in society. Throughout the long process for women’s self-determination, which includes the quests for broader access to knowledge, better education, and enhanced civil and political rights, religious doctrine and feminist movements all around the world often were, and in some cases still are, at odds. Interreligious dialogue itself, in promoting respect between different religious traditions potentially favors patriarchy by preserving male privileges both in the representation of religious traditions and in their same norms and roles. Yet, the long-standing role of religion(s) in establishing rules that have been producing and nourishing gender inequality is complex and, as intersectionality clearly reminds us, cannot be generalized through an oversimplified and decontextualized use of feminist, positively connoted terms such as agency, empowerment, or self-determination. Moreover, the fruitful transnational and intergenerational dialogue within

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<sup>2</sup> See on this specific issue: Rich 1986; Haraway 1988.

different feminist movements and feminism(s) has shown the feminist claim that “patriarchy is the structuring grammar of all religions is debatable” (Shih 2010: 222). It has also demonstrated that the same religious systems may gradually change over time and adapt (or not) to the current gender equality principles and policy, as well as to existing socio-economic realities which can better guarantee political rights, economic emancipation, and independence, without necessarily impeding women to act ‘religiously’. This complexity, as Cochav Elkayam-Levy reminds us, seems to grow as “democratic countries protect conflicting ideals; for instance, freedom of religion and freedom to manifest one’s religion versus freedom from religion, secularism and gender equality” (Elkayam-Levy 2014: 1177). It is also inevitably linked to the way in which gender and religion interact with migration, with what happens, in other words, to religious and gender-traditional women as they migrate to more gender-egalitarian countries (Kanas & Müller 2021).

Our volume purposely opens with the work of Lilla Maria Crisafulli that introduces an interdisciplinary view of the state of the field. Her “Gender and Religion: A dialectical relationship” focuses on the complex relationship between gender and religion through an important diachronic analysis that marries historical events with recently rediscovered female voices of the Western literary tradition. The contribution of gender studies together with historical recovery and reconstruction of traditions and practices enacted from second-wave feminism onwards, thus confirm the existence of a constant and fruitful collaboration between women’s appeals for human rights and (their) religiosity. In certain historical periods, as the contributions of Western proto-feminist and feminist writers demonstrate, religion has given women the possibility to access ways of personal, cultural, economic, and even civil empowerment thus accelerating the modern process of secularization.

Drawing on the domain of religious studies, Anne-Marie Korte reminds us that feminist studies in religion have also had unique trajectories that distinguish them from both women’s and gender studies on the one hand, and traditional religious studies on the other. This is the reason why it is necessary, according to Korte, to offer an insight into how the study of religion has changed in the recent past through the development of a critical gender-focused perspective. To explore, in other words, the way in which disciplines that have traditionally focused upon religion as their main subject, have been influenced by gender studies. Significantly, Korte’s essay proves, it is the impact of a critical gender perspective in fields of study that have a less systematic stance towards religion, which are increasingly important for the development of research into religion and gender. One such key example are the social sciences in which the study of religious themes forms only a small niche. As Professor of Religion and Gender at the University of Utrecht, within her essay Korte presents examples

of promising strands of research in the social sciences, primarily through exploring the actions of women in varying, mainly orthodox religious contexts, whilst considering what ‘acting religiously’ means for these women. In doing so, the essay acts in accordance with the feminist practice of correlating the personal with the political.

Debora Barnabè’s essay focuses on the religious writings of the seventeenth-century English Benedictine nun, Gertrude More, a founder of “Our Lady of Consolation” in Cambrai (France), to expose how spiritual agency could be exercised through religion. Moving from feminist theories on religious women’s agency to mysticism and gender, Barnabè interrogates More’s texts to show how she succeeded in changing forms of male cleric control without necessarily subvert the clerical hierarchy of the convent. In *The Spiritual Exercises* (1658) More uses the language conventions of religious women’s speech to criticise the abuse of male clerical control in affecting her spiritual life, encouraging, instead, a personal and intimated mysticism.

The use of religious principles and arguments as possible spaces for women’s cultural and personal agency is also at the core of Laura Valentina Coral Gomez’s essay. The essay focuses on Radical Unitarian principles and their consideration of literature as an instrument of social and political change – which included women’s cultural emancipation. It is within the context of this progressive attitude towards women that Coral’s essay reconsiders Mary Leman Grimstone’s literary production, such as journal articles and novels, which was permeated by her advocacy in favour of women’s rights. As part of Radical Unitarian circles, Grimstone used literature to denounce the oppression of women, vindicate their right to a proper education, demand changes within the institution of marriage, as well as advocate for reforms and improvements which, in the future, would have favoured women’s emancipation as citizens and full political subjects.

The last two essays consider Muslim women in Britain, and Islamic Feminism more broadly. Both texts offer constructive readings in which gender, religion, intertextuality, and cultural studies are interwoven in order to deconstruct the Western feminist gaze that is often inaccurately employed to explain the complexities of Islamic Feminism and its different forms of female empowerment and agency. Lucy Spoliar’s essay takes “humour” as a lens through which to explore the changing forms of marginality, inclusion and diversity politics as experienced by Muslim women living in a British context. These women are perceived as unable to laugh due to a stereotypical representation that depicts Muslim women as deeply driven by religion, customs, and their place in social hierarchy. Drawing on analysis of the stand-up comedy of Shazia Mirza and the BBC sitcom *Citizen Khan* (2012-2016) Spoliar examines how comic representations and self-representations of

Muslim women both contest and reproduce stereotypes as comedy is often perceived in different ways.

The volume concludes with Kamelia Sofia El Ghaddar's essay questioning agency and empowerment in Islamic Feminism. In dialogue with a decolonial feminist lens, the author presents several critical approaches in order to reconsider key concepts such as agency and empowerment when applied to Islamic Feminism. The essay also offers a deconstruction of the Muslimwoman neologism to show that religion can be employed as a real source of agency. Within the methodological framework of decolonial studies and intersectionality, a "feminist" reading of the Qur'an is seen as a critical and empowering religious practice.

We would like to warmly thank the contributors and reviewers to this special issue dedicated to 'Gender and Religion' within the framework of 'Diversity and Inclusion'. Their essays demonstrate the overwhelming need to discuss, discover, and disclose the experiences of female voices who have been historically marginalized, in hopes of an increased interest in the role of religion during the past and present in relation to gender roles and female writings. Our aim is to open up conversations and exchange around literature, gender and religion, and provide a platform for ongoing debate and scholarship focusing on these timely and vital topics.

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