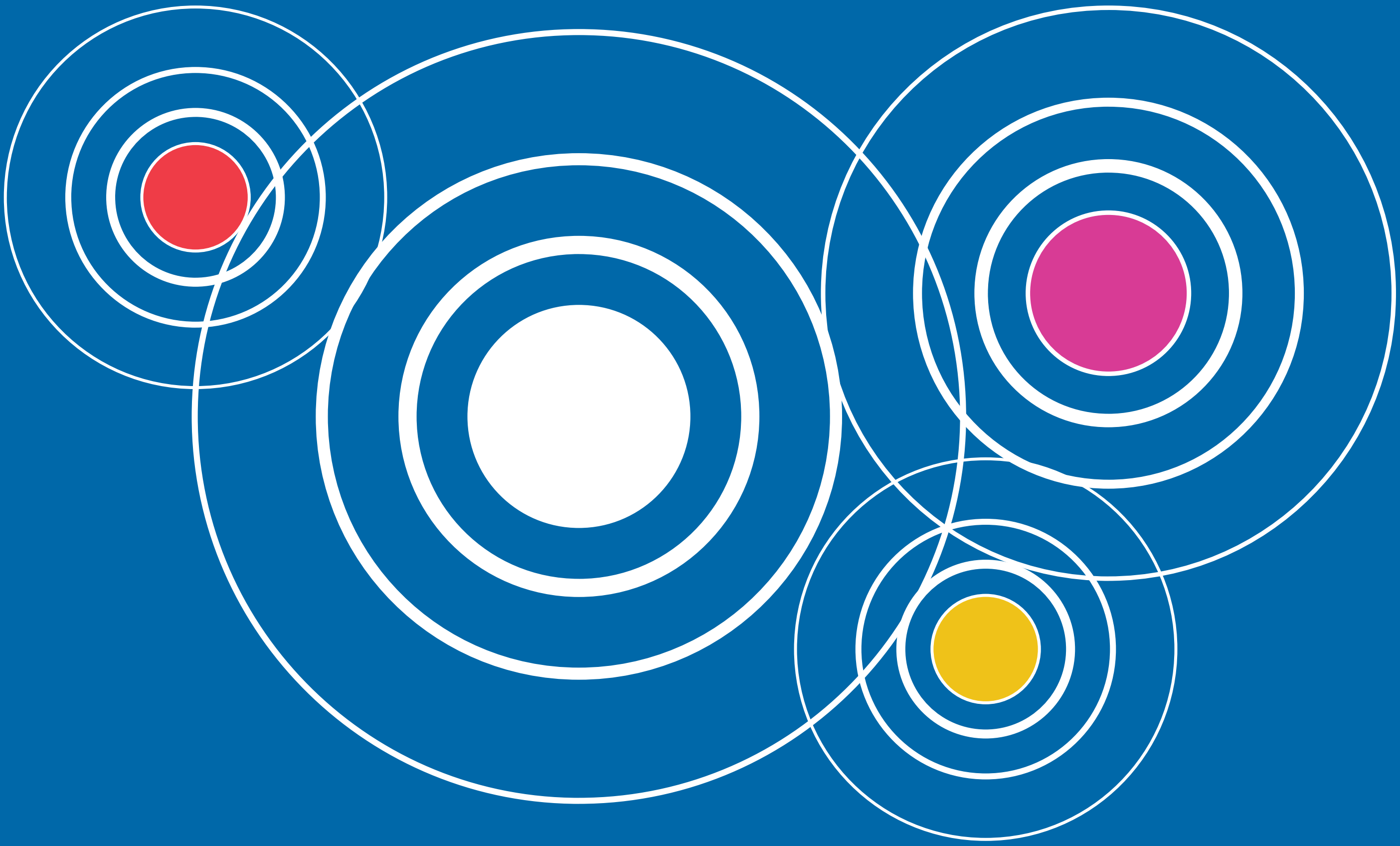

DIVE-IN

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

DIVE-IN – An International Journal on Diversity and Inclusion is a scholarly journal that takes a comparative and multidisciplinary approach to cultural, literary, linguistic, and social issues connected with diversity and inclusion.

The journal welcomes the submission of interdisciplinary contributions representative of various interests and methodologies, particularly linguistics, literature, philology, history, social sciences and economics.

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DIVE-IN
An International Journal on Diversity & Inclusion

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,[1] are rather complicated and difficult issues. Yet, as the essays collected in our volume explain, this is an ideal opportunity

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[1] 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.

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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),[2] 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 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).

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[2] See on this specific issue: Rich 1986; Haraway 1988.

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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DIVE-IN
An International Journal on Diversity & Inclusion

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

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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 provisionary 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

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[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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‘Feminist Theology’, ‘Lived Religion’ and the Investigation of Women in Conservative Religions as Changing the Agenda of the Study of Religion*

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Abstract In this article, it is demonstrated how scholars located in various disciplines have brought their feminist agenda to the study of religion in what I see as three different routes: feminist theology as disputing the old discipline of theology in Western countries; ‘lived religion’ as offering an alternative vantage point to religious studies in the U.S.A. and the U.K.; and a focus on women in conservative religions worldwide innovatively studied by feminist anthropologists and sociologists. Often these differing routes between feminist theologians, female scholars in religious studies and feminist social scientists are perceived by their immediate followers in terms of ‘mutual disregard’ or ‘double blindness’ (King 2004; Woodhead 2007; Llewellyn & Trzebiatowska 2013). However, I believe a broader social and substantive analysis of the different positions of feminist theologians and feminist social scientists as I show here is more adequate. This illustrates very well that not only intellectual training in a certain discipline contributes to a research position, but also the social, political and religious relations, networks and power relations in which the researcher stands, or finds herself standing in.

Keywords religious studies; gender studies; social sciences; religion and gender; feminist theology.

1. Introduction

In this article I want to give an insight into how the study of religion has changed in the recent past with the development of a critical gender perspective. First, I will present the two disciplines that have traditionally focused upon religion as their main subject, theology and religious studies, and I will show how they have been influenced by gender studies and what results this has had. I also want to show the impact of a critical gender perspective in the fields that have a less

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* Invited contribution.

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systematic stance towards religion, such as the social sciences in which the study of religious themes only forms a small niche, but which are increasingly important for the development of religion and gender research. I hope that such an overview is helpful for all upcoming research on this very interesting terrain.

I realise that my own gender critical perspective on theology, religious studies and their mutual relationship plays an important role in this essay, both on a personal level and because of my position as professor of Religion and Gender at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. The personal level I introduce at the beginning of my contribution. However, my position in the Dutch academic world of today is also of significance here. For example, the institutional forms of theology and religious studies, as well as that of gender studies, which exist for instance in Italy, are quite different from mine; in my case, these are constituted by predominantly Anglo-Saxon intellectual traditions. This forms a substantial difference with institutions that are more oriented towards German or French academic traditions (Palma 2017; Oliver & Warrier 2008). This is one of the points that I would like to discuss with this article: to which institutional forms of theology and religious studies, as well as gender studies, do you actually relate in your work, and what does that mean for your research as far as it touches upon gender *and* religion?

In the following sections I will address these questions: I will start with a personal acknowledgement, then I will discuss the position of theology and religious studies as academic disciplines in a historical and contemporary perspective. Next, I will show when and how gender studies became involved in the study of religion, tracing both the routes of feminist theology and of 'lived religion'. Third, I will present some examples of what I esteem interesting and promising forms of research in the field of religion and gender from the field of social studies, based on empirical research into what women actually do in different and mainly orthodox religious contexts, and what they themselves mean by 'acting religiously'. I will finish with a few conclusions.

2. Personal acknowledgement

I started my professional life as a feminist theologian coming from a Roman Catholic background, in a Roman Catholic Theological University in the Netherlands. In the first twenty years of teaching and undertaking research in this field, the relationship between feminism and Christianity never felt a great problem to me. On the contrary, I had become a feminist to change the Roman Catholic religion that I grew up in, and my philosophical and theological studies, as well as my training in gender studies, gave me the tools to work toward this goal, as did the networks I participated in. I opted to work in systematic theology on feminist hermeneutics, I wrote a dissertation on the works of the radical feminist theologian Mary Daly, and I organised several collaborative research projects on feminist theological subjects in the Netherlands, for instance on corporeality, religion and gender (Korte 2000a; Korte & De Haardt 2002; De Troyer et al. 2003).

After twenty years, in 2006, the political, cultural and religious situation had changed more and faster than I had expected. The Dutch Roman Catholic Church had become much smaller, as well as far more conservative, and Dutch society had turned secular in a very evident way. The Roman Catholic doctrines on family values (such as gender complementarity and the prohibition of abortion and euthanasia) gained a prominent role in public debate; the more the secular society rejected these doctrines, the more the Roman Catholic Church pushed these warrants to the fore, and banned the dissenting discussion of these views from within its own ranks. I was not allowed to teach at this Roman Catholic University in the Netherlands anymore because of my liberal and feminist theological views. I changed to a professorship of Religion and Gender at a State University in the Netherlands, Utrecht University, in the faculties of Religious Studies and Gender Studies. At least for the Roman Catholic bishops, but also for the civil authorities of Utrecht University, the discrepancy between my feminist views and the theological stances of the Catholic University had become unbridgeable. However, the strange thing was that for myself this was not fully the case, I still felt a feminist theologian, which left me, for long time, in a position of confusion about my profession and belonging.

I provide this example from my own life to illustrate where my own position regarding gender studies and religious studies comes from and how this is situated. I am not only interested in describing what people, and especially women, *do* when they are participating in religious communities and what their ideas and opinions are, but I am also studying them to learn about their efforts to *change* these communities at the level of organisation, doctrine, ritual and other practices, and to understand the impact of their efforts on their selves, their communities and the wider society. I will return to this topic at the end of this article.

3. Theology and religious studies as academic disciplines

The disciplines in which religion is studied as a central subject are theology and religious studies, two disciplines with very different backgrounds in terms of their status and genesis. Theology is one of the oldest fields of science, dating back to the early days of European universities in the twelfth century. From the very beginning, it developed in close contact with the Roman Catholic Church because its primary goal was to provide professional training for the higher ecclesiastical cadre. Characteristic of Western Christian theology is that it is centred on the study of sacred texts. This practice knows a long tradition of authoritative interpretation combined with a normative and church-based instance that monitors this interpretation, which tends to favour conservative and archaic views of science. As it developed, it came to consist of a normative discourse in an argumentative style based on religious doctrines and liturgical practices and it has, spoken from a modern point of view, an 'insider's perspective', which means that statements are professed toward its particular faith community, and that these statements are also justified with regard to this community.

Further, in European countries, most established institutions for theological education derive their position from the Peace of Augsburg (1555) which installed the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* ("whose realm, his religion"). Theological institutions became connected to the form of Christianity of their own country, such as Lutheranism in Scandinavia, Anglicanism in England, various forms of Protestantism in the Western European countries, Roman Catholicism in the south of Europe and Eastern Orthodox Christianity in Eastern Europe. This results in the discipline of theology leaning heavily on local circumstances and authorities (Straumann 2008).

As a result of processes of secularisation and individualisation, theological institutions, especially in Northern and Western Europe, have decreased in number and size in recent years, and their influence has diminished considerably. On the other hand, it is precisely the fact that these institutions are linked to churches and religious communities that allow them to continue to exist, and the highly fluctuating relations with the civil authorities in various regions also contribute to this (Kennedy 2005; Kennedy & Zwemer 2010). In Northern and Western Europe, the ties with the Christian churches have become much looser, while in Eastern Europe and Russia an opposite process occurs, involving new alliances between the churches and politics; in both cases, the Christian churches are focusing on identity politics to increase their visibility. This is also reflected in the theological education at institutions in the various regions.

Since the last two centuries, academic theology as a discipline in Western countries has also become known for its extensive and creative interpretations of religious texts, and its elaborated views on hermeneutics (or ‘systematic reflection’ on text interpretation) in intellectual circles (e.g. Friedrich Schleiermacher), which has resulted in twentieth century currents such as liberal theology (e.g. Paul Tillich), political theology (e.g. Johan Baptist Metz) and liberation theology (e.g. Gustavo Gutierrez). The movement known as ‘feminist theology’ has found most of its starting points within these currents from the early seventies on.

Religious studies (at least the European form of religious studies I am considering here) emerged in the nineteenth century as part of the theological education in Europe at the time of the colonial regimes. Religious studies were initially designed to support this colonial policy and the missionary activities that came with it. Religions differing from Christianity were studied with the question of how they related to Christianity, the superiority of which was undisputed at the time. However, Christianity’s reputation also had to be increasingly defended as more and different religions came to stand side by side and over and against it. Religious studies scholar Tomoko Masuzawa has described this process in her book *The Invention of World Religions* (2005), in which she shows how Christian scholars struggled in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to justify the privileged position of their faith, while theorising and classifying other religions such as Buddhism and Islam against the backdrop of Orientalism, the experience of colonialism and postcolonial struggles (Masuzawa 2005). The definition of “world religions” that resulted from these processes contributed to a hierarchical ranking of religions, based on the superiority of Western culture and the role of Christianity therein, and the process of ‘othering’ of various cultures, and are still present in definition debates on religion to this day (Cotter & Robertson 2016).

In the second half of the twentieth century, religious studies in Europe, as a discipline, gradually freed itself both from its position within theological education institutions and from its colonial agenda (Taylor 1998). It has, however, positioned itself over and against the discipline of theology, claiming to be a neutral, objective and scientific field of studies and in this sense, it has become somewhat frozen in the opposition of the secular versus the religious. In this Western European form of religious studies, classical scholars of religion from the beginning of the twentieth century such as Rudolf Otto, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim often figure to guide insights on religion, but also the great societal and cultural philosophers of the nineteenth century, such as Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, are influential on this point. It took until the late 1990s for feminist religious scholars to gain a foothold in this field, especially because of the prevailing idea that this discipline had to be defended as a neutral, objective and 'real scientific' field of studies which formed an additional hurdle to overcome from a critical gender perspective.

During the past twenty years, religion has become a more pronounced subject of study outside the above sketched dual field of the disciplines of theology and religious studies. From other disciplines, especially the social sciences with anthropology, sociology and psychology, religion is now studied within these disciplines' own approaches. In practice, it is mainly the individual status of the discipline, such as sociology with its emphasis on quantitative methods, or anthropology with its field research and interview methods, which determines how religion is approached, as the study of religion occupies only a small place in these vast disciplines. Interestingly, some fruitful approaches from gender studies that have an impact on the research agenda of religions currently come from individual scholars in these fields of research.

Hereunder, I will discuss the various ways in which gender approaches have changed the agenda of the study of religion. I present them here under the headings of 'feminist theology', 'lived religion' and 'research into women in conservative religions', respectively, and by doing this I aim to explore the mutual (in)comparability of these approaches.

4. Gender studies involved in the study of religion: feminist theology

Looking at the way gender studies have made an impact in the study of religion in all the above-mentioned disciplines, the remarkable fact is that feminist scholars have gained a foothold in theology much earlier than in religious studies or in the other disciplines that focus on religion. 'Feminist theology' can be described as a women's movement in Christian and also Jewish theological studies, emerging in the 1970s in the United States and Western Europe as part of the second feminist wave. Feminist theology was supported by a large group of women in the Christian churches who, at that time, began their process of social emancipation. They extended this programme to the religious communities to which they belonged and to the corresponding theological institutions. At the heart of this movement were well-educated white Christian and Jewish women who criticised both church organisations and church teaching and practices from the Enlightenment principles of equality and self-determination. Feminist engaged theologians ended up in theological institutions as part of this movement and they brought about substantial renewal of the theological curriculum. They drew their strength both from the ideas and practices of the second feminist wave and from theological renewal movements such as political theology and liberation theology, which also strongly depended on the philosophy of Enlightenment. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, they made a major contribution to the theology of various Christian churches, as well as to Jewish thought (King & Beattie 2005; Ruether 2002; Chopp & Greeve Davaney 1997; King 1995; Raphael 2019).

I will briefly discuss the work of two feminist theologians that I would like to present because of their special connection between European and American intellectual traditions, but also to show where their major feminist obstacles actually lay, namely in obtaining an academic theological education and achieving and securing positions at university institutions.

Mary Daly, Roman Catholic by birth, lived from 1928 to 2010 and was from the New York area. She acquired seven Catholic university degrees, two of which were obtained in Switzerland in the 1960s at the only university in the world that did not exclude women from the highest courses in systematic and philosophical theology. Her stay in Europe gave her decisive new impulses. The Second Vatican Council (1963-1965) in Rome left an indelible impression on her awakening feminist consciousness: she remembered seeing numerous cardinals in pompous processions with a small group of silent nuns in their wake. In 1967 she was appointed associate professor of theology at Boston College in the United States, and at that time wrote her first book, *The Church and the Second Sex*, which was a modest plea for gender equality in theological and ecclesiastical fields (Daly 1968). It relied heavily, as its title indicates, on Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), but in contrast to De Beauvoir, Daly optimistically foresaw a gradual change in the Roman Catholic Church. However, Daly had not foreseen the opposition that this – in her eyes – ‘moderate’ book evoked: Boston College decided not to renew her appointment. Nationwide protests led to this decision being reversed, and Mary Daly gained national fame as a Roman Catholic feminist. In the 1970s, she rapidly radicalised: she joined the women’s movement and began to see a decisive link between women’s liberation and divine revelation. In 1973, she presented this in her famous book: *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Liberation* (Daly 1973). According to her, facing sexism leads not only to a radical critique of religiously sanctioned patriarchal power, but also to a new redemptive naming of oneself, God and the world from women's own perspectives. With her striking aphorism: "If God is male, then the male is God", she became the figurehead of emerging feminist theology. In 1975, she made a 'qualitative leap beyond patriarchal religion.' No longer did she criticise Christianity and other religions for their patriarchal character; she now declared patriarchy itself to be the prevailing religion of the whole earth, on which she published several more books. Central to her life's work was the transition of women as objects of theology and philosophy to religious subjects, and the emphasis on their agency and subjectivity in this context (Korte 2000b; 2000c; 2009).

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, the second feminist theologian I would like to briefly introduce, came originally from Romania and was born in 1938 in a German Roman Catholic family that fled to Germany during the Second World War. She received her theological education in West Germany; her ambition to study theology required special episcopal approval. She was the first woman to successfully complete the theological training for priesthood students in Würzburg. In 1970, she received her doctorate from the Catholic Theological Faculty in Münster with a study that showed both her feminist interest and her solid stance in historical-critical theory, a relatively new approach in biblical studies (Schüssler Fiorenza 1972). After her doctorate she moved to the United States, where she was appointed biblical scholar at the University of Notre Dame. There, in 1983, she published *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, a landmark book on feminist biblical interpretation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983). This book was written in the context of the emerging academic gender studies in the United States and Western Europe.

Schüssler Fiorenza revised the historical-critical hermeneutical principles of the biblical approach with which she was familiar from her training in light of these new feminist historical and literary methods. She presented women as historical actors whose presence and activities are not sufficiently recognised in the biblical texts. These texts need to be read with an understanding of the systematic obscuring of women's part in early Christian communities. At the same time, they must be read with an awareness of what women probably did do: they acted, for example, as apostles, leaders of house churches, missionaries and deaconesses. There is no 'objective' or 'factual' account of the events of early Christianity; the methods Schüssler Fiorenza proposes are reconstruction and imagination in a feminist and liberation theological perspective. With *In Memory of Her*, Schüssler Fiorenza reconstructed early Christian history as an era in which gender oppositions and conflicts are considered very similar to those of today. She thus opened up a new perspective on both the genesis of Christianity and the contemporary theological relevance of the central Christian texts. For her, the Bible is not a 'timeless archetype', but a 'historical prototype', which is a source and model for the liberation struggle of women and other oppressed people. To her astonishment, she was not allowed to use this book in her own lectures at Notre Dame: it would not meet the standards of scientific objectivity. Schüssler Fiorenza then left for the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and went on to become the first Krister Stendhal Professor at Harvard Divinity School in Boston. This accelerated her academic work and led to numerous new publications and activities in line with *In Memory of Her*.

Mary Daly and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza were part of a generation of eminent female theologians, to which also belonged systematic theologians Rosemary Radford Ruether and Carol Christ, historian Carolyn Walker Bynum, philosophers of religion Grace Janzen and Ursula King, Jewish theologians Judith Plaskow and Melissa Raphael, Afro-American theologian Delores Williams and many others. This group was very well known, and partly still is, both in the academic theological world and in Christian and Jewish church circles (Fulkerson & Briggs 2012; Raphael 2019; Giorgi & Palmisano 2020). Their legacy is huge and rich: they have written on biblical interpretation, systematic theology, practical theology, ritual studies and spirituality all from an engaged feminist perspective and they have recovered women's history through all stages of religious history, which also means the discovery of many of these women's texts.

What made this group of scholars so influential turned out to also be its major limitation. Their 'insider's perspective', namely the fact that they focused on the credibility of their religious views for a particular faith community, namely the Western Christian churches, and that they based this on the corresponding sacred texts, lost much of its relevance especially in the increasingly strong and rapidly secularising Western world from the 1990s on. As the churches became smaller, more conservative and confessional, feminist theologians lost the constituency that had always supported them; these were the liberal believers who had now left the churches in large numbers. The social and political influence of this progressive form of Christianity, particularly in

Western Europe, declined significantly. The faculties of theology became smaller and much more conservative in a secular culture surrounding them, and in Europe some theological institutions also shed their feminist theologians, as my personal example already showed.

5. Gender studies involved in religious studies: 'lived religion'

The most successful collective intervention in religious studies from a gender perspective comes from female sociologists of religion, actually a substantive number of scholars located in the United States and the UK who focus mainly upon Christianity. They were relatively late in developing their own research agenda from a gender studies perspective, probably due to the 'hard' scientific-theoretical requirements to be met in their discipline, and the lack of appreciation for research on religion related to the general expectation of secularisation trends in Western countries in the twentieth century (Woodhead 2007, 2008; Neitz 2014). They also had only few female role models in the study of religion: feminist scholars could only appeal to a handful of scattered individuals as predecessors, such as Islamologist Annemarie Schimmel, Hindu scholar Wendy Doniger, anthropologist Susan Starr Sered or classicist Elaine Pagels.

In this case, the combination of historical-contextual and ethnographic research into women's lives in religious communities, actually in the Western world, and a critical rethinking of the principles of this research in light of gender studies proved profitable. I will give a brief outline of the most promising projects and authors on this front.

'Lived religion' was initiated from the beginning of the twenty-first century mainly by female sociologists of religion who focused on the religious practices of Christians as well as those of other or new religious groups in Western countries (Orsi 1997; McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2014, 2021). In contrast to the great emphasis in the Anglo-Saxon sociology of Christian religion on doctrinal theological statements, church-state relations and ecclesiastical organisations, their aim is to use empirical study to chart the daily lives and religious practices of people of faith. The predominance of the secularisation thesis is criticised: religions change rather than diminish and can no longer be described solely in institutional and confessional terms. The inherently Protestant character of the conceptual framework of the current sociology of religion is also addressed. In it, belief in a pure, inner form is presupposed and rituals and other religious practices related to material and physical matters are perceived with reserve.

‘Lived religion’ starts from a very different conception of what matters to religion: what people feel, experience and find is at least as important as what they think or believe, and the aspects of religion that make ‘religious worlds’ real and present are placed centrally, such as religious rituals that take place in everyday life. Additionally, the hybridity in the religious experiences and practices of those interviewed is looked at: the simultaneous presence of different religious movements or loyalties. These connections have become frequent and unpredictable, which means that not the classical institutional divisions of religions should be taken as a starting point when studying religious experiences and practices, but new authorities, invented traditions, imagined communities and new forms of belonging. In particular, the description of women’s religious experiences, in relation to the everyday reality where they mostly take place, has given an innovative impetus to the sociology of religion, while simultaneously affirming research principles from gender studies such as studying the agency of women, and the emotional and corporal embeddedness of their practices. Sociologists Grace Davie, Daniele Hervieux-Léger, Meredith McGuire, Nancy Ammerman, Kim Knott and Linda Woodhead all work from this direction.

6. New perspectives from social sciences on religion and gender: research into women in conservative religions

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is also female scholars in anthropology, sociology and philosophy of religion who have been shaping a gender critical research agenda in religion and are adding new insights to it, especially from a focus on women in conservative religions. These scholars have a much more detached relationship to religion than the feminist theologians and the religious studies scholars I have just discussed. They have an ‘outsider’s perspective’ towards any form of religion and their commitment is not so much with the religions they research, as with the groups of women they focus their research on. With this commitment, they take recent developments in gender studies as their starting point, relating to famous scholars in this field such as Joan Scott, Judith Butler and bell hooks. What makes these scholars particularly interesting in my view is that it is precisely because of their research material, namely women in various religions, that they give critical but also innovative impulses to the gender studies debate. Their subject is, at first glance, often entirely contradictory to their own feminist principles and assumptions. Most institutional religions have conservative gender regimes and are dismissive of modernity, including women's and LGBT+ rights. The confrontation with this situation provides important new insights, both for the gender studies research agenda and for the study of religions (Fedele & Knibbe 2013; Gemzöe, Keinänen & Maddrell 2016; Starkey & Tomalin 2022). I will discuss here three interventions that are very productive in my view. They all rely on a rethinking of the concepts of agency, authority and authenticity from a gender critical perspective with respect to certain groups of women in religion that are studied.

Saba Mahmood, anthropologist and ethicist, is the most illustrious example of this trend. She was born in 1962 in Pakistan and came to the United States in 1981 to study at the University of Washington. Eventually, she moved to the University of California, Berkeley, where she became a tenured professor in the Department of Anthropology, until she passed away much too early in 2018. She has left an indelible mark on the Western feminist debate by challenging its liberatory and progressive assumptions exactly by discussing the results of her research into a group of conservative Islamic women in Egypt. Her major work, *Politics of Piety* (2005), was based on ethnographic observations of women participating in the Islamic revival movement in Cairo, a moral reform movement whose orthodox practices are commonly viewed as inconsequential to Egypt's political landscape (Mahmood 2001; 2005). In this book, she challenged the Western notions of agency based on autonomy and individual freedom invoked by feminist scholars when analysing this type of movement, and asked:

> How do we conceive of individual freedom in a context where the distinction between the subject's own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving the subject's potentiality? (Mahmood 2005: 31)

The value of Mahmood's work lies in its success in broadening the argumentative potential of feminist theory while also revealing its limitations. The *Politics of Piety* constitutes a deeply layered critical reflection on the limits and problems of dominant assumptions regarding agency, freedom and subjectivity that are so important in major strands of liberal feminist thought, a reflection that is created by precise and uncomfortable research into women's lives while they are partaking in conservative religious movements. Moreover, with her research, Mahmood also stimulated interest in the unpacking of the polarised secularism-religion dichotomy underpinning feminist discourse (Sullivan et al. 2015; Mahmood 2016).

The second feminist scholar I want to present here is Orit Avishai, sociologist of religion, who currently has a leading role in the revisioning of the gender studies debate in religion. Her original contribution lies in the coining of the term ‘doing religion’. She was born in 1970 in Israel and is now professor of Sociology at Fordham University in New York. Her field of study is the position of women in conservative religions, in particular Orthodox Judaism, and she questions how to conceptualise women’s position herein from the perspective of their agency. Her position forms a response to social studies of women’s experiences of conservative religions which associate agency with strategic subjects who use religion for extra-religious purposes. In contrast, she considers agency in the first place as religious behaviour and religiosity as a constructed status. Drawing on studies that examine how Orthodox Jewish Israeli women observe, discuss, and understand the regulations on marital sexuality, she seeks to explain religious women’s agency as *religious* behaviour, or the ‘doing’ of religion. She shows, as she states herself, that doing religion is associated with a search for authentic religious subjecthood and that religiosity is formed in accordance with the logic of one’s religion, while at the same time it is in the context of controlling messages about symbolic boundaries and cultural others. This approach ensures that religion is not discussed as *sui generis* or isolated, or in a vacuum distanced from other aspects of life, but that its study allows actual, empirical and theoretical flexibility to consider a range of phenomena (Avishai 2008; 2016). In this way, she ensures that, on the one hand, religion is not written out of the picture and is studied as an integral part of the researched women’s lives, while on the other, she approaches religion as embedded in other cultural practices, thus staying close to the lived religion approach.

The final example of an innovative contribution to the research agenda of religion and gender comes from Finland, from Elina Vuola. She was born 1960 in Finland and is Professor of Global Christianity and Dialogue of Religions at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki. She also participates in the lived religion approach and works as an ethnographer, but what makes her interesting is that she links this position to a feminist theological approach and that she works on a comparative basis. She has developed several interdisciplinary research projects that combine research on religion in Finland and in Latin America as it is lived (ethnographic methods) with theological (textual) analysis in order to create a more comprehensive picture of how theology and religious identities interact, especially in contexts where these two might be in tension with each other. Her objective is to understand the complex relationship between certain Judeo-Christian religious traditions and their followers´ identities and sense of agency within them (Vuola 2016a).

One example of her work concerns the worship of the Virgin Mary at the level of ordinary people, which she has investigated in research projects in both Finland and Latin America. Her thesis is that the meaning that, especially women, give to Mary implies both a confirmation of their everyday experiences that centre around motherhood, family life and sexuality, and also contains a more transcendent meaning with potentially religion-critical and religion-transforming elements. She analyses sexism in the Christian tradition, which of course is also present in the official teachings on Mary, and in relation to this looks at women's own capabilities to interpret and transform their religious traditions. From an analysis of the stories, poems and prayers that circulate in the popular piety of Mary, she observes that the creative 'work' that is present here is directly related to the concrete living conditions of these women and to their spiritual ambitions. The figure of Mary in particular lends itself pre-eminently to this: in the official doctrines of Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions she is presented as an exemplary believer, but at the same time also as the Mother of God, and she functions as mediator between the earthly and heavenly worlds. Supported by the work of feminist philosophers of religion Grace Jantzen and Luce Irigaray, Vuola argues that Mary is seen by many women as a 'divine ideal', that is, as a comprehensive and alternative religious experience of the world around us grounded in women's own experiences. In this sense, Mary constitutes a transgressive symbol (Vuola 2012; 2016b). Vuola believes that it is precisely through interdisciplinary cooperation between ethnographers, folklorists and feminist theologians that this kind of research can be achieved, and is more sceptical about "feminist theorising that sees religion primarily as sociopolitical or institutional, drawing its conclusions from either an easy link between formal religion and women's subjugation or from doctrinal statements" (Vuola 2012: 518). I find the type of research presented by Elina Vuola particularly interesting because she puts text based religious materials at the centre of her research while at the same time using ethnographic methods to analyse this, and tries to give an interpretation of the life world of these women that incorporates these religious texts' materials.

7. Conclusions

In this article, I have demonstrated how scholars located in several disciplines have brought their feminist agenda to the study of religion in what I see as three different routes: feminist theology as disputing the old discipline of theology in Western countries; ‘lived religion’ as offering an alternative vantage point to religious studies in the U.S.A. and the U.K.; and a focus on women in conservative religions worldwide innovatively studied by feminist anthropologists and sociologists. Often these differing routes between feminist theologians, female scholars in religious studies and feminist social scientists are perceived by their immediate followers in terms of ‘mutual disregard’ or ‘double blindness’ (King 2004; Woodhead 2007; Llewellyn & Trzebiatowska 2013). However, I believe a broader social and substantive analysis of the different positions of feminist theologians and feminist social scientists as I have shown here is more adequate. This illustrates very well that not only intellectual training in a certain discipline contributes to a research position, but also the social, political and religious relations, networks and power relations in which the researcher stands, or finds herself standing in.

Secondly, I have shown where I think interesting initiatives lie when it comes to the study of religion from a critical gender perspective. Feminist theological approaches are certainly of importance here, particularly the study of religious texts and their hermeneutics, and how people relate to them. Post-secular feminist philosophy such as that of Saba Mahmood is, secondly, also of great importance as an angle of approach because it poses critical questions to current conceptions of religion in relation to historical and political changes in society.

Thirdly, the historical and empirical approach of ‘lived religion’ is important because this approach maps from a bottom-up position how people’s lives are structured on a daily basis and what role religions might play in them, instead of analysing this from the other way around. The above sketched perspectives help to focus on specific gender issues that are important for understanding what drives people in the religious field, such as the question of women’s own share in religious communities, the distribution and handling of power relations within these communities, and the question of what these religious traditions as such have to offer women and how this can be expressed.

Finally, I have argued that I consider it important that feminist theological and social science approaches to religion become more intertwined. I personally think this is a particularly fertile field of research.

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“O that I did truly love! For by love only my soul shall become capable of understanding truth”: Dame Gertrude More’s *The Spiritual Exercises* (1658) from a feminist perspective on religious women’s agency and on mysticism and gender[*]

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Abstract English Catholic nuns from the early-modern period were marginalised voices for several reasons: firstly, they were women, in a historical context where their voices were usually not expressed and not heard; secondly, they were Catholic under the penal laws; finally, they were exiled on the continent. The seventeenth-century English Benedictine nun, Gertrude More, a founder of “Our Lady of Consolation” in Cambrai (France), has received scholarly attention mainly for her religious poetry and for her analysis of obedience to superiors in *The Spiritual Exercises* (1658), a collection of her writings assembled by her spiritual director. Building on feminist theories on religious women’s agency and on mysticism and gender, this contribution aims to reveal how More’s agentic capacity was realised through her religion: she employed the language conventions of religious women’s speech to criticise the abuse of male clerical control and she appropriated her spiritual director’s contemplative life teachings to develop her own mysticism.

Keywords early modern England; Dame Gertrude More OSB; gender; agency; mysticism.

In *Writing Habits: Historicism, Philosophy, and English Benedictine Convents, 1600–1800* (2021), Jaime Goodrich, a renowned scholar of English religious women’s writings from the early-modern period, issues a call for further research in early-modern studies through the lens of a feminist philosophical perspective. The latter “can offer precious insight into the ways that early modern believers understood and sought to engage with God, on both a

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[*] **Author’s note**: when possible, the quotations in this paper keep the original early-modern English spelling. Translations into modern English have been provided in square brackets next to each word only when the original spelling could impede the understanding.

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personal and a collective level" (Goodrich 2021: 164). This could also be of relevance to the contemporary readers who, despite their religious positionality, confront the need to find an answer to the philosophical question of God's existence (Goodrich 2021: 164). Moreover, although the strive for locating and analysing women's writings is already grounded in feminist theory, the latter could also "generate new critical theories that alter our understanding of early modern textual production" (Goodrich 2021: 165).

This essay attempts to answer Goodrich's call by examining the religious writings of the seventeenth-century English Benedictine nun, Gertrude More, through feminist theories on religious women's agency and on mysticism and gender. Starting with Simone de Beauvoir (*Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1949) and Luce Irigaray ("La Mystérique", in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 1985), feminist theory over the last forty years has "moved from approaching mysticism as a peculiarly female malady to considering whether mystical practices offered women paths of resistance and self-actualization" (Weber 2012: 327). This paper aims to offer an original contribution to this debate and to demonstrate how More's agentic capacity was exercised through her religion: on the one hand, she managed to change certain forms of male cleric control, not by subverting the clerical hierarchy of the convent, but by wittingly "conforming to stereotypes of female speech and submissive behaviour" (Weber 2013: 48). On the other hand, by building on her spiritual director's contemplative life teachings, she affirmed her personal way of uniting with God; in other words, she developed her own mysticism, which ultimately led to her spiritual and human self-realisation.

Helen More (1606-33), in religion Dame Gertrude and great-great granddaughter of Sir Thomas More, was among the founding members of the Cambrai convent "Our Lady of Consolation", one of the seven English Benedictine cloisters founded in France and Flanders in the aftermath of the Dissolution.[1] Very little is known about her unfortunately short life – she died at only twenty-seven – and the main source for reconstructing her life, both before and after her monastic vows, is her biography written by her spiritual director, Augustine Baker: *Life and Death of Dame Gertrude More* (2002 [1635 or 1636]).

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[1] In the history of Catholicism in England in the early-modern period, the years between 1536 and 1540 are also known as the dissolution of the monasteries and religious orders realised by the King Henry VIII. About eight hundred monasteries and religious houses were dissolved and all their furniture, libraries and other artistic objects were sold, destroyed, or burnt. The first house for women religious on the continent was the Benedictine Monastery of the Glorious Assumption founded in Brussels in 1598. Also due to fallouts at the original Brussels convent, several other Benedictine communities were launched: at Ghent in 1624, at Boulogne in 1652, then relocated to Pontoise in 1658, at Dunkirk in 1662 and at Ypres in 1665. The convent of Our Lady of Consolation founded in Cambrai in 1623 was the only Benedictine monastery in exile under the direct authority of the English Benedictine

This paper examines More's understanding of Baker's teachings, hence the latter will not be discussed here. However, given their importance in More's spirituality, something must be said about these teachings and about the office of a male spiritual guide for women in general.

During the Counter-Reformation, and more precisely since the Council of Trent (1545–63), the Catholic Church recommended strict control over spiritual life, especially for women, so as to avoid the spread of heresies. Women religious lost part of the spiritual freedom they had enjoyed until then as they could no longer choose an eremitic life or an independent life in the world as consecrated virgins. On the contrary, they had to be affiliated to a convent and to be surveyed by men. The office of male spiritual guides hence acquired a pivotal role for women religious, since they acted as mediators of God's will for the nuns, who followed their guidance as part of their obedience vow to superiors. It is in this context that the position of Baker at Cambrai must be interpreted.

David Baker, in religion Augustine (1575 – 1641), was a Benedictine monk best known for his writings on mystical spiritual contemplation, who was appointed spiritual guide at Cambrai for nine years, from 1624 to 1633. Once there, he did not support the Jesuit spiritual exercises and meditational regime, in use after the Council of Trent in most of the English communities in France and the Low Countries,[2] but rather he provided general guidance and encouraged the nuns under his supervision to find the "devotional path which best suited their ability and temperament" (Walker 2004: 240). According to Baker, central to advancement in spiritual life was the observance of the interior call, or divine inspiration, and this alone would bring peace to the soul and lead it to a state of perfection. Baker therefore approached spiritual direction as a general guidance to "spiritual self-sufficiency" (Van Hyning 2013: 144) and not

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Congregation; its daughter house was our Blessed Lady of Good Hope opened in Paris in 1651.

[2] Jesuit missionaries were often responsible for recruiting potential postulants among the English gentry for the founding of religious houses on the continent and they therefore spread their spirituality (Van Hyning 2013: 150). Jesuits played a significant role, for example, in the foundation of the first English convent on exile, that is the Brussels Benedictines (Kelly 2020: 24).

as a strict control over spiritual life, as the Catholic Church recommended from the Council of Trent onwards, especially for women. He therefore "discouraged dependence on spiritual directors" (Beacham et al. n.d.: para. 2) and believed in "individualized connections with God without confessors as the middlemen, ultimately giving nuns more autonomy in their spiritual lives" (Beacham et al. n.d.: para. 2). As for prayer practice, Baker encouraged the nuns to employ "personalized forms of prayer such as spontaneous affective aspirations (or short ejaculatory prayers) in order to reach a state of passive contemplation of God" (Goodrich 2019: 606).

When More visited Baker for the first time, she was experiencing a spiritual crisis because she could find no profit in the prayer and meditational regime of Cambrai. This led her to a state of desolation and restlessness. According to Baker, "she needed […] to be brought into a simplicity of soul which is the immediate disposition to union with God" (Holloway 2004). "Immediate disposition" meant she could access God herself, without a male, patriarchal confessor. Baker called this simply the "way of love", i.e., following her internal call (Plante n.d.: para. 4). More found great profit in following Baker's spiritual guidance and she soon became an advocate of his spirituality: when Baker was accused of anti-authoritarian and heterodox doctrine for leaving too much freedom and spiritual independence to the nuns, More wrote a text called *An Apology for Herself and Her Spiritual Guide and Director, the Venerable Augustine Baker* (hereafter the Apology). Baker, on his side, collected More's personal papers after her death and he prepared them for publication, which occurred in 1658 under the title *Confessiones Amantis: The Spiritual Exercises of the Most Vertuous and Religious Dame Gertrude More* (hereafter *The Spiritual Exercises*).[3] The text is written in English and it contains the Apology, fifty-three Confessions to God and other sentences, prayers, sayings and poems found in some of More's papers and in her breviary. These texts originate from More's reflections on the Office and they have a collaborative nature as she describes her contemplative prayer life, directed by Baker, and the latter finds in More a perfect example to prove the validity of his teachings (Walker 2004).

In 2009, Arthur Marotti produced a facsimile edition of the 1658 edition as part of the Ashgate series *The Early Modern Englishwoman: A Facsimile Library of Essential Works*. The latter was chosen as the base text for this article as it is the most recently edited of More’s writings, which contains the Apology, the Confessions and her poems.

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[3] The publication of *The Spiritual Exercises* was finalized in Paris in 1658 by a priest called Fr Francis Gascoigne (1605-76) since Baker was removed from Cambrai in 1633.

1. Obedience to superiors

Many feminist scholars tackled the issue of religious women’s agency in what Kelsy Burke called “gender traditional” or “conservative religions”, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Burke 2012: 122). Orit Avishai interpreted the agency of Jewish religious women as an authentic religious conduct, not meant to pursue extra-religious ends, but orthodoxy (Avishai 2008). Saba Mahmood, who studied Muslim women instead, defined agency as the “space of action that relations of subordination enable and create” (Mahmood 2001: 203). Sarah Bracke also studied young Muslim women adhering to Milli Görüs, an Islamic movement within the Turkish diaspora in Europe, and she contended that their agency consisted in a strive to achieve a higher level of spirituality through a great self-discipline (Bracke 2008).

Avishai, Mahmood and Bracke highlighted how the “turn to agency” (Bracke 2008: 62) in feminist theory since the 1990s has led to an oversimplification of the concept of agency itself, as the latter became the equivalent of resistance to patriarchal social norms and of struggle for freedom, as understood by western liberal cultures. As far as religious women are concerned, Avishai, Mahmood and Bracke called for going beyond this submission/resistance dichotomy and proposed so-called “compliant models” of agency (Burke 2012: 123), where the latter was expressed not despite, but through religion. More specifically, for them agency consisted in an authentic religious conduct.

The analyses of Avishai, Mahmood and Bracke focused on the contemporary age, where the dynamics of women’s emancipation and of secularisation are certainly not comparable to those of the seventeenth century. Moreover, their studies regarded western- as well as non-western religious traditions, whereas this essay focuses on a precise religious tradition, namely the English Catholic Benedictine Order. This said, I think their models could offer an interesting perspective to interpret the religious experience of Gertrude More, as she expressed her agency not against or despite, but through her religious belonging: on the one hand, she managed to change certain forms of male cleric control, not by subverting the clerical hierarchy of the convent, but by wittingly “conforming to stereotypes of female speech and submissive behaviour” (Weber 2012: 48). On the other hand, by building on her spiritual director's contemplative life teachings, she affirmed her personal way of uniting with God.

In *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (1990), Alison Weber demonstrated how this well-known seventeenth-century mystic exploited a self-depreciatory language in her writings as a rhetorical strategy which enabled her to ultimately affirm her identity and her agency. I would argue that in the case of Gertrude More's *The Spiritual Exercises*, we are facing a similar case: three times in her writings she refers to herself, and to women in general, as "silly" (*Confessions* 47, 189) and she uses the terms "vnworthy", "vnworthiest" and "vnworthines" thirty times for herself and for her speaking.[4] In addition, in the Confessions she defines herself as being "contemptible" (25, 156, 189), "poor" (253, 255, 256), "imperfect" (256), "ungrateful" (301), a "wretch" (235, 291) and, finally, "wicked" (286). This submissive and derogatory tone betrays More's religious background on the necessary "low and plain style" of female speech (Goodrich 2019), but it contrasts with the strength of her arguments, which, as we shall see in the following paragraphs, are all but weak.

In 2002, Kitty Scoular Datta revealed how, beyond the surface of the apparent modest writing of the Apology, addressing primarily herself and other nuns, More displayed an anti-authoritarian nature: she is critical of blind obedience to superiors, defends Bakers' teachings against any accusations and advocates a spiritual model where the soul can have a direct relationship with God, without the intermediary role of a male confessor (Scoular Datta 2002: 54). Jenna Lay "built upon […] Datta's scholarship to spotlight More's role in supporting the development of female agency within the context of her convent" (Bazzi & Plante n.d.: para. 5). She explored More's criticism of "blind obedience" to Superiors and stated that "her written confessions marked her not only as Sir Thomas More's descendant but also as his "intellectual successor in resisting unlawful authority" (Lay 2016: 91). More certainly recognised the necessity to obey authorities as far as earthly matters are concerned, but regarding her devotion, she criticised those who usurped God's role (Lay 2016: 102). Arthur Marotti also argued that More advocated spiritual freedom in her text, by following her "divine call or inner light", i.e. the spiritual course that best suited her, and she called for resistance or "civil disobedience" to the superior when he refuses to accept the "inner light" of the practitioner of contemplation (Marotti 2015: 157).

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[4] (Apology 27); (Confessions 23, 25, 26, 58, 59, 60, 62, 81, 125, 153, 156, 169, 195, 205, 234, 235, 253, 255, 256, 259, 267, 286-287, 288, 291, 293, 296, 298, 299, 301).

In the Confessions, More underlines the importance for spiritual directors to command not in their power, but in God's: "What thou wouldst command, they would commend [command]" (More 2009: 206) and to seek His honour and glory and not their own. She criticises superiors when they usurp and abuse their power and claims that if a spiritual director had a humble spirit and truly sought to accompany the soul to discern God's will, he would not disdain to entrust the soul to the care of somebody else, even inferior to him, in case his guidance would procure more benefit to that soul. By referring to the Scriptures, More stresses the importance of "giuing [giving] that to God which is only Gods own, and to Ceasar that which is due to Ceasar" "for both these obediences are necessary to make a true spiritual life" (More 2009: 192). Obedience is a virtue More continuously asks to God, but it should not be interpreted as a blind exterior attitude of submission to a male minister, but rather as an interior disposition to accomplish God's will through the guidance of a spiritual director; otherwise, every sort of disorder, uneasiness and rebellion would arise. For example, she argues that "the sensual love, and friendship between the Superiors and their subjects would cease" when the superior "governs" the soul only in regard of God's will (More 2009: 207). In More's understanding, "Powre [power] was giuen by God, for edification and not for distruction" and this edification consists principally in the "Superior accommodating him-self to the interior diuine [divine] call of his subject" (More 2009*:* 106).

According to More, Baker epitomizes "the good superior" because he did not tie her to himself, but he rather guided her to find and to accomplish God's will. In the Apology she writes:

> I found my heart grown (as I may say) as hard as a stone, and nothing could haue [have] been able to haue mollified it; but by being put into a course of prayer; by which a soul tendeth towards God, and learneth of him the true lesson of humbling her-self. Which effect I finding by following Father Baker's plaine, simple, easy and sweet instructions [...] (More 2009: 14).

Baker taught More not to be "daunted with [...] sins" (More 2009: 24) and did not ask her to confess more than was necessary to her spiritual progress since all would turn to her good if she tended to God by prayer and renounce "al [all] inordinate affections to created things" (More 2009: 24). He provided her with general instructions in contemplative life and underlined that the "diuine [divine] spirit" is "the proper Maister [Master] of the interior" (More 2009: 52) and God is “the only Teacher of the way of spirit” (More 2009: 53). The evening before More’s death, it was reported that Baker was at Cambrai and More was asked if she wanted to meet him, but she replied: “No, nor any man” (Baker 2002: 323) and this was interpreted by Baker as the proof that she was so advanced in her spiritual life, that she did not need the guidance of any priest, not even that of her master in contemplative life.

In her writings, More reveals an actual analysis and a deep awareness, on the part of a religious woman of the early seventeenth century, of the problems related to convent life and of the issue of obedience to domineering men. She recognises that discursive prayer procured her no benefits, thus she searched for help and did not resign until she found Baker’s spiritual way that she felt was the most appropriate path for her: “For liuing [living] in Religion (as I can speake by experience) if one be not in a right course between God and our soul: Ones nature growes much worse; then euer [ever] it would haue been, if they had liued in the word [world]” (More 2009: 13).

More acknowledged the diversity of everyone in spiritual matters: “For as we al [all] differ in face so do we differ in the manner of our exercises that are interior” (More 2009: 46) and she pursued what she felt was her way in contemplative life without letting anyone, male or female in a position of authority, deprive her of her comfort. She was determined to follow her interior call and divine inspiration and looked for a direct relationship with God.

2. Mystical union with God through love

It will be argued that another way in which More showed agency in her religious life was through her mysticism since, by following the “way of love”, as Baker and More called it, or, in other words, by following her “interior call”, she affirmed her personal way of uniting with God. The focus of the next paragraphs will be on the Confessions, as they contain religious meditations where the author reflects and comments on her contemplative life. First of all, however, the meaning of the term mysticism requires clarification.

Nelstrop writes that the word “mysticism” is a modern coinage: its first known use occurred in France in the seventeenth century and spread from there to other European vernaculars. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “mysticism” was first used in English in 1736 (Nelstrop et al. 2009: 1). The adjectival forms like “mystic” or “mystical” instead are far more ancient. They derive from the Greek language and designate those who had devoted to secret rituals and mystery religions (Jantzen 1995: 23). As the contemporary theologian, Mark MacIntosh comments: “Today we often use the term ‘mysticism’ though this is really something of an academic invention; earlier eras referred to the most intimate and transforming encounter with God as ‘contemplation’” (MacIntosh 1998: 11).

The way mysticism is conceived in this research has nothing to do with extraordinary phenomena, such as ecstasies and visions, but with internal union with God by means of prayer and contemplation. As David Lunn wrote, “strictly speaking, mysticism is the union of the soul with God, or the ultimate stages in the search of it, using self-denial and the prayer of contemplation for its attainment” (Lunn 1975: 267).

Liam Temple argued that the early modern period was “a key period of distrust, suspicion and derision towards mystical experience in the West” (Temple 2019: 1). Differently from the medieval period, when mysticism had a privileged position, it then declined in popularity and came to be considered “inherently esoteric, one which was unintelligible to the wider Christian community” (Temple 2019: 10). It was considered irrational and fanatical and it hence lost its place among those sources of knowledge which were considered legitimate at the time (Temple 2019: 14-15). As a consequence, writers of mysticism began to “claim authority through their relation to a long tradition of authors, identified for the first time as ‘mystics’” (Temple 2019: 14-15). This is exactly what Baker did: he read and adapted “previous works of mystical experience to build a ‘canon’ of what he referred to as ‘mystick authors’” (Temple 2019: 25). He is in fact considered “the first writer in the English language to have referred to mystical writers as ‘mysticks’ in this way” (Temple 2019: 25). Interestingly, spiritual authors such as Pseudo-Dionysius became a sort of “seal of quality” (Temple 2019: 15) of past mystical tradition and, as a matter of fact, he is among the authors Baker referred to in his reading lists for the Cambrai nuns. Drawing from medieval spiritual authors such as Walter Hilton and the Pseudo-Dionysius, Baker firmly discouraged visionary experiences and other extraordinary bodily manifestations. He preferred writers “who talked of contemplation not as the extraordinary experience of a privileged few but as the normal goal of every Christian” (Norman 1976: 206). Gertrude More, who came to be considered his “star pupil” (Baker 2002: xxv), believed and acted “on the principle that contemplation is the normal means of approaching God in prayer for all Christians, not the exclusive privilege of a few specially gifted souls” (Norman 1976: 208).

She “belonged to a tradition of mystical writers who believed in the value of the *via negativa*, a path to union with God through total self-abnegation and the emptying of the mind of set ideas and images" (More 2009: 13). Abnegation consists, as the *Imitation of Christ* teaches, not only in finding joy and fulfilment in God alone and in renouncing all earthly inordinate affections for creatures, but also, for oneself. Baker himself described the spiritual path of abnegation in his *Secretum*:

> ye [the] higher ye soul is Elevated from ye Bodily Senses, & abstracted from them & from ye body [...] ye lesse subiect is She to be Caryed away wth [with] ye inordinate passions & Affections of ye body and of Sensuality, out of wch [which] springeth ye cheif or only perill & Damage of our Soules (Baker, *Secretum*, 20, in Van Hyning 2013: 149).

In More's understanding, abnegation means giving her heart, mind, body and soul entirely to God, without retaining anything for herself or for other creatures, so that God could accomplish His will in her. Moreover, abnegation implies dying to oneself and to other created things because an inordinate affection for them would distance the soul from the Creator. This may seem difficult to grasp and possibly harsh to live. However, what More means, referring here to a whole mystic tradition, namely the Flemish and Rhineland tradition, which is influenced by the women mystics Hadewijch, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and Beatrijs of Nazareth (Scoular Datta 2002: 62, 63), is not that human affection *per se* is wrong, but rather it is an inordinate affection. In other words, a love which is not rooted in God or, worse, which substitutes God, and thus becomes an idol: "[…] For if the soul do willingly retain an affection to any such thing, she is at a stop, and can go no farther. For God must be sought and loued wholy, if we desire to arriue to Perfection" (More 2009: 248).

In addition, More was instructed into the so-called apophatic tradition. In the early sixth century, Dionysius the Areopagite introduced the terms "apophatic" and "cataphatic" into Christian theology, which stem from the Hebrew scriptures and Greek philosophy. They mean, respectively, the use of negation and affirmation when talking about God (Louth 2012: 137). In his *Mystical Theology*, the Aeropagite contends that it is impossible to know what God is, He is unintelligible and inexpressible as He transcends everything which exists. Therefore, according to the Aeropagite, any intellectual concept is inadequate in theology and the language of negation, or "apophatic", is the only possible to talk about God because we can only come to understand what He is not (Jantzen 2000: 94).

In *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (1987), Caroline Walker Bynum contends that women’s spirituality in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was primarily enacted through the body. She argues for a distinctively female somatic piety, characterised by a propensity for hyperbolic suffering and erotic mysticism. Furthermore, she noticed a prominence of eucharistic devotion, food ascetism, feeding miracles and food images in late medieval female’s piety. According to Bynum, women’s spirituality typically belongs to the cataphatic type, since they use “natural symbols and the material world to experience and express the divine” (Scoular Datta 2002: 51).

More’s mysticism, however, cannot be defined as sensory only, as Bynum understood it, namely based on the somatization of the mystical experience and/or on self-inflicted suffering; she did not experience any extraordinary bodily manifestation or “parapsychic phenomena”, such as “visions, voices, ecstasies, stigmata, localized bleeding, exudations, levitation, or inedia” (Bruneau 1998: 16). The latter were discouraged in the apophatic tradition and medieval spiritual literature was cautious about them; Walter Hilton, for example, affirmed that these kinds of mystical phenomena could come from the devil and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* contended that they could often be the product of brain diseases (Jantzen 2000: 59). Baker himself firmly discouraged visionary experiences. Datta underlined how More’s spirituality has a more “apophatic” character (Scoular Datta 2002: 51) since she stresses God’s unintelligibility and inexpressibility: “To speak with him it is impossible, the distance of place is so great […]” (More 2009: 101, 102). “My God, whom none can see and live […]” (More 2009: 103).

According to the apophatic tradition, God is a reality beyond any human intellectual category and the only way to approach Him is through a personal relationship. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* also contrasted reason and love when talking about God, saying that it is impossible to understand God, but He can be loved: “It is my wish to leave everything that I can think of and choose for my love the thing that I cannot think. Because he can certainly be loved, but not thought. He can be taken and held by love but not by thought” (*The Cloud of Unknowing* VI, in Jantzen 2000: 95).

More followed Baker’s contemplative path leading to a passive contemplation of God through simple affective prayer (Goodrich 2021: 75). She rejected intellectual forms of devotion, in favour of a devotion based on feeling (Meyerhoff n.d.: para. 3). As a matter of fact, she practiced prayer of sensible affection, that is a type of prayer that involved her feelings, more than her understanding. In other words, she did not aim at knowing God through rationality or discourse, but she rather hoped to experience him as a "spiritual lover" (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 3760). She writes: "Lett our harts [hearts] study nothing ells, but how to love thee […] we cannot learn but by conversing with thee" (More 2009: 38).

More suggests that prayer, understood not only as a discourse, but as affective union with God, also elevated her mind to the understanding of the divine mystery, more than reading and studying could do:

> […] Thou art not to be seene in this life as thou art, yet, an humble soul is not ignorant of thee […] by loue obtaineth the heavenly wisedome of thee […] (More 2009: 82).
> […] Yea to shew thy power thou hast been pleased many times to bring a silly woman, louing thee, to that wisedom that no creature by wit or industry could attain to the same […] (More 2009: 189).

Interestingly, in the above quotations More uses the terms "humble soul" and "silly woman", to refer to herself. She again seems to wittingly use her religious language conventions as far as women's speaking is concerned, to state exactly the opposite: she says that women are silly and they can only access God by means of love, but at the same time she affirms that the relation of love with God greatly surpasses the rational knowledge of him. She continues:

> Those that loue thee, and seek only to please thee, are those which haue a sight in part, of what in heaven we shall enioy cleerely for all eternity (More 2009: 90).
> O that I did truly love! For by love only my soul shall becom capable of vnderstanding truth (More 2009: 95).
> For one learneth more in Prayer of thee in one hower [hour], then all creatures in the world could teach (More 2009: 10).

Going back to Bynum's theory of women's sensory mysticism, she contended that somatic piety was a creative response of women to the loss of sacerdotal and temporal powers that occurred with the Gregorian Reform of the twelfth century. Therefore, it became a strategy for women to achieve subjectivity and transcendence (Bruneau 1998: 216). Marie-Florine Bruneau, a French historian and literary scholar, agreed with Bynum insomuch that "sensory mysticism allowed female mystics a charismatic power and access to transcendence otherwise denied to them" (Bruneau 1998: 222). Yet she questioned Bynum's idea that female somatic piety is a natural female disposition (Bruneau 1998:

10) and a source of empowerment, as it reiterates an identification of women with the "weak flesh". Therefore, instead of contrasting misogyny and patriarchy, it seems to reinforce it (Bruneau 1998: 222). In *The Soul as Virgin Wife* (1995), Amy Hollywood also underlined the limits of Bynum's approach and contended that women may have felt compelled to describe their spirituality in embodied terms as the intellectual language was precluded to them. For example, she proved how Marguerite Porete's spirituality, just to mention one, was far from embodied but rather speculative and anti-visionary. Hollywood then proposed a variety of perspectives to approach women's spirituality, not just the embodied one. Grace Jantzen later added another important element to the analysis of Christian women's mysticism and argued that it was a "social construction" (Jantzen 1995: 12) related to issues of power, authority, and gender. She reconstructed (or deconstructed) the traditional history of Christian mysticism and demonstrated how women came to be considered "naturally more spiritual than men" (Jantzen 1995: 17, 18). This led to a confinement of "both the "feminine" and the "spiritual" to "a context in which they are rendered thoroughly ineffectual" (Jantzen 1995: 17, 18), starting with the scientific revolution and especially during the Enlightenment and the Post-Enlightenment, when religion in general was reduced to a philosophy's binary opposite and mysticism was increasingly subjectivised, depoliticised and described in terms of an ineffable experience.

What all these theorists seem to have in common is their search for a specific form of religious women's mysticism. They ask themselves if there is a female spiritual language and what the female way of relating with God is. As Patricia Ranft demonstrated in *Women and the Religious Life in Premodern Europe* (1998), the history of Catholicism teaches that women have been extremely creative in following their interior call: alongside women whose mysticism was somatic, like Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila, there were others who, on the contrary, practiced a negative or apophatic mysticism. In particular this applies to the Beguines of the thirteenth century, and to others who, like Mary Ward, were devoted to active or apostolic service instead, when the latter was not precluded to them. I therefore believe that Bruneau only addressed one side of the problem as somatic piety was not the only spiritual life type of women religious, hence it cannot be considered as the only existing female disposition in religious life.

Moreover, somatization and affective piety drew from a long tradition in Western Christianity of erotic and nuptial mysticism which were also experienced by men. Erotic metaphors, together with the idea of a mystical marriage with God were frequently used in the thirteenth century Rhineland and in the Low Countries, especially among Dominican nuns influenced by Eckhart, and his followers, Tauler and Suso. These authors were well known by Baker, and they were among his suggested readings to the Cambrai nuns alongside "Gregory of Nyssa, Blosius, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hugh and Rich of St Victor, St Bonaventure, Ruysbroeck, the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, St John of the Cross, St Teresa of Àvila and many others besides" (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 4024). It can thus be argued that it is not a matter of an intellective more-elevated spirituality or an affective less-elevated spirituality, where the former is typically associated with the male and the latter with the female, but rather a diversity of calls that women felt and in which they found fulfilment. In More's case, it was a devotion based on feeling and affection, which also emerges in her language, and can be defined a "language of love".

To follow is an examination of this language of the Confessions in order to reveal how More wittingly appropriates Biblical references and the tradition of affective piety to build her own contemplative path. The focus will be on two recurring aspects: the sensual and erotic imagery and the food imagery.

2.1 The language of love in the Confessions

More's prose in the Confessions is amorous, her language echoes the Song of Songs[5] and her register is highly emotive and sensual, like that used by a romantic lover (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 3965-4020). She calls God her only beloved (More 2009: 4) and only desire (More 2009: 16) and wishes to be united to Him forever by "a knott of Love" (More 2009: 8). Her heart is consumed by this love for her Creator, as if by a "flame" (More 2009: 13) and her heart sings "songs of Love to Him" (More 2009: 16). Nothing in this world can satisfy her soul, but God who is her "only love, light, hope, comfort, refuge, delight, and whatsoever else can be desired, or imagined" (More 2009: 16, 17). He is More's friend, comforter and true lover and More flies into Him to seek peace and to satisfy her unquiet heart:

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[5] The Song of Songs (also Song of Solomon, Canticle of Canticles, or Canticles) is the most erotic book placed right at the heart of the Bible. Its author is unknown. Images taken from the Song of Songs often appear in texts from male and female mystics alike as this book celebrates the erotic love between a bridegroom and his bride, who represent Christ and His church respectively, and in mystic union the soul is elevated to be united with God, as if in marriage.

> Let me be drowned, and swallowed vp in that of Diuine loue, in which my soul may swim for all eternity (More 2009: 126).
> Neuer was there euer such acquaintance, loue, and friendship, between any in this world, as there is between thy Goodnes and an humble soul (More 2009: 188).

The relationship with God is described by More as intimate and erotic like that of a bride and bridegroom: "[…] faithfull soul, who seeketh nothing but to imitate her beloued, […] to become an initimate, and inward friend of this our heavenly Bridegroome" (More 2009: 80). What is also interesting about More's amorous language is the concept of "wounding" to describe her personal experience of God's love:

> […] neither can they take any content, but hearing thy name, speaking to thee, and longing after thee, after thou hast wounded their soul with thy Divine Charity (More 2009: 30).
> […] and some times thou speakest to vs; so that it pearceth, and woundeth with desire of thee, the very bottome of our soules […] (More 2009: 40, 41).
> O who wil giue me the wings of a Doue that I may fly into the open wounds of my beloued? (More 2009: 261).

It can be noticed in the above quotations that on the one hand it is "us" to have been wounded by the Divine Charity and on the other hand the "open wounds" are those of God, the beloved/bridegroom. Moreover, the image of the dove is a clear resonance of the Song of Songs, where the beloved (2:14; 5:2; 6:9) and/or the eyes of the beloved (1:15; 4:1; 5:12) are compared to this bird.

Another feature which characterises More's mystic language is the use of food imagery. God's presence in her soul is a "heavenly repast" (More 2009: 33) which "satiates" (More 2009: 25) her heart. Moreover, God's words are compared to honey: "The words of thy Royall Prophet […] they are more sweet to a loving soul then the honny, or the honny combe" (More 2009: 64). God's presence thus become concrete and flesh-like in More's words, like food and drink, and has the capacity to nourish the soul and to fortify it:

> […] let thy name […] aboue all earthly things delight, […] refresh me amidst the stormes of temptations which daily assault me (More 2009: 88).
> Giue her to drink who withers away for want of thee the fountain of al sweetnes. I will power out my soul before thee […] (More 2009: 111).

> […] with the sweet dew of thy Grace refreshest them (More 2009: 144).

Finally, being in God's presence is compared to being invited to a dinner: "[…] tast of thy supper […] Religion, which is the place where we may most aboundantly tast and see, how sweet our Lord is […]" (More 2009: 176).

Food analogies are also employed in the Bible to describe eternal life, which is compared to a wedding banquet where we would unite forever to our Creator:

> Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet […] (Matthew 22:1-14).

Moreover, Jesus compared Himself and His words to food: "[…] Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty' […]" (John 6:35).

In the dedicatory epistle of *The Spiritual Exercises* written by the priest Francis Gascoigne to More's sister, Bridget More, he states: "the whole Book hath nothing in it almost but Scripture" (More 2009: 4). As we have seen, in the Confessions More writes her meditations on the Office, thus the Scripture and its language necessarily pervades her text. However, although this imagery originated from the Sacred Texts and from the tradition of affective piety, in which More was well read, I would argue that she is not merely repeating models here, but she rather takes an active role: she could have taken from the Bible an emphasis on hyperbolic suffering and self-sacrifice, but she chooses to focus on love and nourishment instead, living a testimony of her joy and satisfaction in following the way of affection. It can be argued that by doing so More again expresses her agentic capacity through her religion, because on the one hand she uses the literary genres peculiar to the mystic tradition, in this case the commentary on the Song of Songs and on Scriptures, and she infuses them with the contemplative teachings received by Baker and with Biblical language. While, on the other hand, she manipulates this language to stress her personal fulfilment, both spiritual and human, in following a spiritual path based on love.

Conclusions

To sum up, Gertrude More was instructed into the apophatic tradition and negative theology through the reading lists, mainly provided by Baker, in the convent of Cambrai. At the same time however, she combined this tradition with a personal devotion based on love and feeling, more than on doctrine or rationality. Baker identified an inclination in her disciple towards affective devotion and he suggested this spiritual path to her, but at the same time, he encouraged each nun under his supervision to follow the way best suited to them since no spiritual director, but God alone, could inspire a soul to find her proper spiritual way. As this brief analysis of More's writings from a feminist perspective has attempted to show, More exercised her agentic capacity not despite her religion, but through it: on the one hand she called for spiritual independence from male superiors, not by subverting her religious conventions, but by wittingly conforming to them. More specifically by employing a humble and submissive language which contrasts with the strength of her anti-authoritarian arguments. On the other hand, in building on Baker's teachings on contemplative life, she develops her own mysticism based on love and appropriates the Biblical language in a personal way, leaving a written testimony of her spiritual and human fulfilment in her contemplative life. Finally, it can be argued that the discussion about a specific form of religious women's mysticism started by Bynum should be enriched with the recognition of the diversity of women's calls to religious life. Further research on the writings of religious women from the early-modern period from a feminist perspective, could contribute to this debate and lead to further promising outcomes.

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DIVE-IN
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Reason as a Gift from God:
Radical Unitarians, Feminism and Mary Leman Grimstone

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Abstract Starting with a description of British Unitarianism, the present paper sheds light on how a particular expression of Christianity in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England influenced the development of early feminist ideas. Unitarians, followers of a Christian denomination that rejects the doctrine of Trinity, believed that reason was a gift from God. They also upheld that both men and women were entitled to use their reason to interpret the Scriptures and arrive at rational conclusions. This article shows how those tenets were instrumental for writer Mary Leman Grimstone and her advocacy in favour of women's rights. Grimstone, as part of Radical Unitarian circles, used literature to denounce the oppression of women, vindicate their right to proper education, and demand changes to the institution of marriage.

Keywords Early feminism; Radical Unitarians; Nineteenth-century England; Mary Leman Grimstone; Christianity.

In this essay I propose to analyse how Unitarians positively impacted campaigns in favour of the emancipation of women in early nineteenth-century England. To do so, I have focused my research on the works of an important member of Radical Unitarian circles: the writer Mary Leman Grimstone (1796-1869). Nowadays, Grimstone and her writings are scarcely known. However, several historians agree on the fact that her advocacy for women's rights was fundamental to the actions Radical Unitarians undertook to improve conditions for women (Gleadle 1995; Rogers 1999; 2000).

Firstly, I will briefly explain Unitarianism as a form of dissenting Christianity, and its influence on the formation of early feminist ideas in England. I will centre my attention on a particular group within Unitarianism, the Radical Unitarians, and on their role in defining a feminist agenda between

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the 1830s and the 1850s. Secondly, I will analyse some of Grimstone's writings, focusing on how she used religious arguments to rebut the scriptural inferiority of women, defend their right to a proper education and criticise the institution of marriage.

1. British Unitarianism

Unitarianism is a denomination within Christianity. According to Francis E. Mineka, it is possible to trace Unitarian ideas back to Poland and Hungary during the sixteenth century, and it seems that the term Unitarian was first coined in Hungary (Mineka 1944: 6-7). However, the present paper focuses solely on British Unitarianism as it developed from the eighteenth century onwards.

British Unitarianism developed from eighteenth-century Rational Dissent (Gleadle 1995: 9-11; Watts 1998: 3). Unitarians, as their name indicates, do not believe in the doctrine of Trinity: they do not believe in Christ as the incarnation or son of God, but rather as a human particularly inspired by God, or as a prophet. They were never a unified denomination, rather different people, groups and collectives that shared the idea of God as one entity and the belief in reason as a gift from God.

Unitarians are considered part of the liberal family of churches. They reject several doctrines of Western Christianity like original sin, atonement, and predestination. They regard the Bible as a source of religious authority, but they do not uphold the idea of biblical infallibility. Like all other dissenters, Unitarians were subject to the Test Acts until 1828. Also, because they denied Christ divinity, they were legally subject to criminal prosecution for blasphemy up until 1813 (Mineka 1944; Gleadle 1995).

As subjects to the Test Acts, Unitarians created their own academies where, as Ruth Watts has pointed out, they combined the study of philosophy, religion, and science as a way of understanding God and God's creation, as well as fostering the growth of knowledge and open, free enquiry. They were never large in numbers, but because of the importance they gave to education and their sense of social responsibility, Unitarians became involved in different liberal and progressive causes, evolving into a powerful and influential pressure group. Although they did not necessarily have a unified doctrinal system, all Unitarians shared a common faith in people's ability to develop their God-given reason through education. This approach led them towards the path of science and experimentation to explain the world (Gleadle 1995; Watts 1998; 2011).

Unitarians' faith in reason and their support of everyone's ability to arrive at rational conclusions were also open to women. For Unitarians, no-one should or could be assumed to have an inferior mental capacity. For this reason, Kathryn Gleadle affirms that "Unitarian women were born into a denomination which encouraged a considerable amount of respect for their intellects and judgements" (1995: 21).

The idea of reason as God's gift was not exclusive to, nor did it originate from, Rational Dissenters. During the seventeenth century Cambridge Platonists had developed their idea of *Recta Ratio*, which postulated that reason was a God-given attribute (Apetrei 2010). This idea, which in its time had already inspired proto-feminists like Mary Astell, survived through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries partially thanks to the Dissenting academies and their studies of the Cambridge Platonists' work (Taylor 2003: 110). According to Barbara Taylor, the idea of reason as a gift from God has a strong presence in the works of Unitarians such as Richard Price, David Hartley, and Anna Laetitia Barbauld (Taylor 2003: 110).

1.1 The influence of rational dissent in the ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft

Through the influence of the Rational Dissenters and Unitarians, these ideas are also present in the work of Mary Wollstonecraft. According to Barbara Taylor, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* "contains at least fifty discussions of religious themes, ranging from brief statements on one or other doctrinal point to extended analyses of women's place within a divinely-ordered moral universe" (Taylor 2002: 99). One such argument is that reason is "an emanation of divinity" and therefore must be the same in men and women,

> The nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator; for, can that soul be stamped with the heavenly image, that is not perfected by the exercise of its own reason? Yet outwardly ornamented with elaborate care, and so adorned to delight man, "that with honour he may love," the soul of woman is not allowed to have this distinction, and man, ever placed between her and reason, she is always represented as only created to see through a gross medium, and to take things on trust (Wollstonecraft 1988 [1792]: 53)

Ruth Watts, in her analysis of the relation between Unitarian philosophy and female education, formulated that the basic premise of Wollstonecraft's work "was that God had created all human beings as rational creatures who therefore had a basic right, irrespective of sex, to develop that rationality through a liberal education" (Watts 1989: 38).

Patricia Howell Michaelson has also traced Wollstonecraft's arguments to the "standard tenets of Rational Dissent", particularly to the teaching of Richard Price. She claimed that Wollstonecraft's originality lay not in the idea of reason as a gift from God, but in extending this idea to women as part of the human family. Michaelson went as far as affirming that "the core of the *Vindication* […] is a religious argument" (Michaelson 1993: 288) (italics original to the text).

Kim Jacobs-Beck has studied the influence that Richard Price, a Rational Dissenting minister, had on Wollstonecraft's work, finding a neat alignment between Wollstonecraft's arguments and Price's sermons. For her, "Wollstonecraft's feminist arguments were deeply grounded in a nonsectarian form of Christianity which she adapted from the Reverend Dr. Richard Price" (Jacobs-Beck 2012: 62).

Reading Wollstonecraft's most relevant work in this light, I posit that the central argument of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is that women are first and foremost rational creatures and that reason, as a God-given attribute, should be developed by the same means and to the same ends in men and women alike.

After her death, Wollstonecraft's works and ideas were read and discussed privately among nineteenth-century Radical Unitarians and were highly influential on their arguments in favour of women's education (Gleadle 1995). However, due to "Wollstonecraft's reputation as a sexual radical and political revolutionary, they did not acknowledge her influence in public" (Rogers 2000: 129).

1.2 Radical Unitarians and their influence in the development of early feminist ideas in England

Gleadle differentiates between mainstream Unitarians and Radical Unitarians. For her, although all Unitarians had more progressive attitudes towards women than the general population, mainstream Unitarians still accepted traditional customs and morals about the appropriate roles and behaviours women were to have and exhibit. Thus, "while encouraging a progression in social perspectives on women, nevertheless cocooned them within conventional expectations of their characters and roles" (Gleadle 1995: 26).

Contrastingly, Radical Unitarians, identified by both Gleadle (1995) and Helen Rogers (2000) as those who orbited around South Place Chapel and its minister, William Johnson Fox, advocated vehemently and comprehensively for women's rights. Their advocacy included an attack on the customs and morals that supported the oppression of women (Gleadle 1995: 34). Radical Unitarians had a broad agenda of social change, and feminism was part of that agenda. According to Gleadle, Unitarians were "staunch defenders of the power of the environment in forming character" and, based on this idea,

> constructed a feminist vision in which female emancipation was part of a wider process than purely that of gender, whereby society might be ruled by reason and not by force; and true to their Christian ideals, whereby people were united by their common concern for one another. Within this context they campaigned not only for female liberation, but also for universal suffrage, national education, and new modes of social organisation (Gleadle 1995: 48-49).

One of the instruments they used in their quest for social reform was literature, in which *The Monthly Repository* played a fundamental role. *The Monthly Repository* was a journal founded in 1806 and, according to Rogers, "tended to be theologically and politically progressive" from the beginning (2000:127). In 1828 William Fox became editor, before buying it in 1831, starting a new series with which the journal "became an important organ of the radical party" (Mineka 1944: 168). According to Ann Robson, between 1806 and 1826 under 5% of the contributors to the journal were women, and "among them were Harriet Martineau, Emily Taylor and Mrs. Barbauld" (Robson 1987: 104). Under Fox's editorship that percentage came up to 14%, and included not only Martineau and Taylor, but also Eliza Flower and Mary Leman Grimstone (Robson 1987: 104).

Radical Unitarians believed in literature as an instrument for social and political change, which explains "their attempts to use it as a tool for achieving female emancipation" (Gleadle 1995: 55). Within this frame of mind, *The Monthly Repository* became a platform for the vindication of women's rights and the denunciation of their oppressed condition. According to Rogers, "under Fox's editorship, some contributors became much more outspoken in their support for women's rights and critically examined the relationship between the sexes, marriage and divorce reform, female education and the 'domestic slavery of women'" (Rogers 2000: 127).

Fox edited *The Monthly Repository* from 1831 to June 1836. This period corresponds with Grimstone's most fruitful contributions to the journal. Grimstone wrote for *The Monthly Repository* from 1833 to 1837, and her articles were "at the forefront" of Radical Unitarian endeavours to create a literature of their own that would help in the campaign for women's rights (Gleadle 1995: 57). According to Gleadle, "Grimstone's most significant contribution to feminist literature" was her series of short stories titled "Sketches of Domestic Life". In these stories she used "literature as a means of drawing the relationship between women's negative character-traits and the cultural conditioning which had produced them" (Gleadle 1995: 57-58).

Grimstone also included debates on women's rights and their emancipation in her many essays and novels. In the next section I will analyse three sets of arguments present in her work that had Unitarian Christian principles at their core, such as the right to use one's reason to interpret the Bible, and everyone's right to develop their God-given reason.

3. Mary Leman Grimstone's contributions to early feminist debate in England

Mary Leman Grimstone[1] was a fundamental part of the feminist movement which developed in England during the first half of the nineteenth century within Radical Unitarian circles. Gleadle, who has done extensive research on Radical Unitarianism and its influence on the development of early feminist ideas in England, describes Grimstone in the following terms,

> For many early feminists, she was *the* great figure in the movement. First coming to prominence with her feminist articles […] Grimstone went on to become a leading proponent of contemporary feminism, in her many periodical contributions and in her novels. Contemporary radicals refer to her work again and again, and her work had an immense influence upon them. (Gleadle 1995: 37) (italics original to the text).

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[1] Grimstone wrote under several names: Mary Leman Rede, Mary Leman Grimstone and Mary Leman Gillies, as well as using only her initials, M.L.R. or M.L.G. She also used a pseudonym, Oscar, and sometimes she even published works anonymously. To avoid confusion, throughout the present paper I will refer to her as Mary Leman Grimstone. However, in the references and the bibliography, her works are referred to with the signature they were published under.

Helen Rogers concurs with Gleadle's assertions about Grimstone, affirming that "she was the most extensively published and probably the most influential advocate of the rights of women among the radical-unitarian circles based around William Fox's ministry" (Rogers 2000: 125).

Grimstone wrote extensively and in a great variety of genres: poetry, novels, short stories, serialised stories, and critical and polemic essays. In all of them, she explored the degraded condition of women and championed the cause of women's rights. In the postscript to her third novel *Woman's Love. A novel* (1832), she defended her interest in changing the social and cultural conditions of women by stating,

> I feel the present to be a period pregnant with important changes. A liberal spirit is abroad that seems disposed to recognize the interests of humanity upon a broader principle than heretofore. In the midst of this I glow with zeal for the cause of my own sex: this preference may be pardoned, since I am not insensible to the beautiful principle that embraces universal interests; but it is natural that, with such little ability as I can bring, I should take the side most in need of supporters (Grimstone 1832: 357-58)

For Grimstone, literature served to reform and advance society. For this reason, the adequate education of women and the reformation of the institution of marriage, as well as the abolition of other laws that kept women in an oppressed and subordinate state, were omnipresent elements in her writings. The characters and plots of her work deal with contemporary stereotypes of men and women not only as individuals but primarily as members of complex domestic and social networks.

Apart from writing for *The Monthly Repository*, during the 1830s Grimstone also contributed to journals like *The Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* and *The New Moral World*. From 1834 onwards her contributions to these journals, and particularly to *The Monthly Repository*, became regular and were primarily in prose. In 1846, after a hiatus between 1837 and 1845, under the name Mary Leman Gillies, Grimstone started once again to write for periodical publications, contributing to journals of popular progress, particularly *The People's Journal*.

Grimstone's contributions to the periodical publications of her time, both during the 1830s and the 1840s, were primarily of two kinds: social essays where she condemned women's position in society as eternal dependants, and short stories like her series "Sketches of Domestic Life", which marked the height of her collaboration with the radical journals.

Using some of her novels and articles, I will exemplify Grimstone's arguments in favour of the emancipation of women. In the next sub-sections, I will focus my attention on those arguments closely related to Grimstone's particular understanding of Christianity, which allowed her to call for a new and better interpretation of the Scriptures, founded in her belief in reason as a gift from God to humanity.

3.1 Grimstone's answer to the arguments about the scriptural bases of women's inferiority

Grimstone's fourth novel *Character; or, Jew and Gentile* was published in 1833 and marked the start of her close collaboration with *The Monthly Repository*. The journal's review of the novel praised Grimstone as a writer and her way of dealing with various argument within the story,

> Mrs. Grimstone excels very much, both in the delineation and the development of character. She preserves its metaphysical truth. Her mind has a distinct conception of the individual nature of each actor in the history […]. The dialogues, which frequently occur, especially in the first volume before the bustle of the story begins, deserve great praise. They are characteristic, well-timed, interesting, and instructive. The first links of long, useful, and often novel trains of thought are put into our hands, and only the most inert will let them slip without tracing them further. Mrs. Trevor, a frank, independent, and speculative woman, who, we presume, speaks the opinions of the author, talks thus […]. (Fox 1833: 546, 549)

One such dialogue is the discussion between Agnes, who would later become Mrs. Trevor, and Mr. Coverley about the condition of women. As the above review claims, Agnes seems to embody Grimstone's ideas about the condition of women and their right to equal treatment. For his part, Mr. Coverley represents the traditional and patriarchal positions of Grimstone's time.

Throughout the first part of the novel Mr. Coverley maintains that women are inferior to men. In one of his discussions about his (misguided) position with Agnes, he puts forward scriptural arguments to support his reasoning. When Agnes argues in favour of equality between men and women, Mr. Coverley cries out, asking: "Do you mean to contravene St. Paul, and deny the Scriptures?" (Grimstone 1833: 77). Agnes answers him with her own interpretation of the story of original sin, pointing to the fact that while Eve had to be tempted by a superior being that not even God could control (that is, Satan), Adam was tempted by an inferior power to that of God or Satan, another human being,

> […] are you really going to march out Adam, and the Apostles, with King Ahasuerus at their head, against me? As to the first witness, let me examine his character before I admit his evidence. He, when he erred, yielded to an inferior power; for it was the spirit that even God could not conquer that tempted Eve, while only a mere mortal solicited Adam (Grimstone 1833: 77-78)

Implicit in Agnes' argument is Adam's weaker character, in comparison to that of Eve. While Eve had to be tempted by a higher being, Lucifer, who was a fallen angel, for Adam to sin it only took the prodding of an equal: his human wife. Grimstone, through Agnes' discourse, also condemns Adam for his willingness to put all the blame on Eve, when he had been more than willing to eat the apple,

> […] when he [Adam] was questioned as to his disobedience, how readily he cried out— 'The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.' As he greedily partook the fruit he might have generously shared the fault; how like dutiful sons you have followed the example of your father ever since. From the co-partnership of error and folly you never shrink; but as for the penalty, you leave to woman the full benefit of that. No, no; as to your great prototype, Adam, I'll none of him (Grimstone 1833: 78)

Grimstone, through Agnes' voice, is thus presenting a new interpretation of a foundational story of Christianity. Traditionally, this story has been used to justify humanity's condemnation, i.e., original sin and the fall of man, as well as women's submission to men as ordained by God. Instead, Grimstone's new reading not only overturns the idea of women's weaker nature, but it also highlights men's willingness and capacity to skew their responsibilities and blame all wrongdoing, even on their part, on women.

The discussion between the characters continues and Mr. Coverley once again calls upon the teaching of the apostles to support his argument in favour of the natural inferiority of women. Agnes answers him by highlighting the fact that the apostles, even if inspired by a higher Being, were nevertheless men and, as imperfect creations, they were thus capable of tainting the original message according to their earthly experiences: "'They were,' said Agnes, 'men, and though filled with the divine doctrine of their great Master, they could not transmit it without giving it a tinge from the earthy vessel through which it passed […]'" (Grimstone 1833: 78).

Agnes also recalls that the Scriptures had never been translated by a woman: "The world may yet see a translation of the Scriptures by a woman, who may detect more mistranslations than even Mr. Bellamy. It will be interesting, if not instructive, to collate the old and new translation" (Grimstone 1833: 79).

These two arguments are perfectly aligned with the Unitarian tenets of using one's reason to understand God and God's message, taking the Bible as a source of authority but not considering it infallible. As Mineka (1944) explains, Unitarians were encouraged not only to read the Bible, but also to arrive at their own conclusions. This is precisely what Grimstone did. She took the Scriptures and interpreted them in a different light, one that supported women's equality. In this case, the arguments made by Grimstone show that women's inferiority and oppression are not necessarily supported by God's message but, rather, it is the worldly, human interpretation of that message which can be patriarchal, sexist and against women.

It would take more than half a century for a group of women to attempt what Grimstone proposed in her novel: a new translation and interpretation of the Bible from a feminine and feminist perspective. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the most prominent figures of the first women's movement in the United States, together with twenty-six women, edited *The Woman's Bible* which was published in two volumes in 1896 and 1898.

There is no evidence that Stanton knew Grimstone or her work. However, Stanton was close to both Quaker and Unitarian circles in the United States and England. In 1840, Stanton participated in the World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London. There she met Lucretia Mott, a prominent woman within the Quaker community and anti-slavery movement in the United States, who would go on to become a Quaker minister. According to Gleadle, during their time in England Mott and other American anti-slavery activists encountered several Unitarians, striking chords with "the particular radical intelligentsia […] with whom they formed strong and lasting bonds" (Gleadle 1995: 3).

In 1848, Stanton and Mott, together with three other Quaker women, decided to hold the first Woman's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, the result of which was the *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* (Wellman 2004; McMillen 2008; Reid 2012). The *Declaration* affirmed that men and women had been created as equals by God, and, as such, had been invested with the same capabilities and responsibilities. It also asserted that men had assumed for themselves the right to determine a woman's place, when in reality this could only be established by God and women's conscience,

> The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world. […]
> He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and her God. […]
> Resolved, that woman is man's equal—was intended to be so by the Creator, and the highest good of the race demands that she should be recognized as such. […]
> Resolved, therefore, that, being invested by the Creator with the same capabilities, and the same consciousness of responsibility for their exercise, it is demonstrably the right and duty of woman, equally with man, to promote every righteous cause, by every righteous means (The Declaration of Rights and Sentiments as cited by McMillen 2008: 238-241).

According to both Sally McMillen and Judith Wellman, American Unitarians were among the first to support the *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* and what it demanded (Wellman 2004: 151; McMillen 2008: 95). With this as her background, it is no surprise that Stanton took it upon herself to edit and publish a female version of the Bible: *The Woman's Bible*, in which American, British and European women participated. In the introduction to the first volume, Stanton affirms,

> The Bible cannot be accepted or rejected as a whole, its teachings are varied and its lessons differ widely from each other. In criticising the peccadilloes of Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, we would not shadow the virtues of Deborah, Huldah and Vashti […]. The canon law, the Scriptures, the creeds and codes and church discipline of the leading religions bear the impress of fallible man, and not of our ideal first cause, "the Spirit of all Good," that set the universe of matter and mind in motion (Stanton et al. 1974 [1896-1898]: 13)

Whether Stanton was aware of Grimstone's ideas or not, it is however possible to affirm that her efforts to translate and interpret the Bible from a woman's perspective aligns itself with the critiques contained in *Character; or, Jew and Gentile*. Both Grimstone's arguments– voiced by her character Agnes– and the reasons behind Stanton's project share the same train of thought: the Bible is fallible because it was written and has been interpreted and translated by men, who, by definition, are imperfect. As such, the Bible cannot be taken at face value. Instead, it can and should be interpreted in a way that supports and guarantees women's equal standing as God's creatures. This interpretation aims to show that the oppression of women is not based on God's commandments, but rather on how men had read and applied God's teachings.

Unfortunately, *The Woman's Bible* was met with great criticism. According to Lisa S. Strange,

> The *Woman's Bible* again made Stanton the object of criticism and scorn, not only among religious leaders and social conservatives, but even among her colleagues in the suffrage movement. Even the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) rejected the *Woman's Bible* by passing an official censure resolution at their annual convention in January 1896. (Strange 1999: 16)

Although, as Kathi L. Kern recognizes, "when the feminist spirituality movement of the 1970s rekindled the attack on patriarchal Christian texts, *The Woman's Bible* was resurrected, reprinted and re-read" (Kern 1991: 372), the truth is that *The Woman's Bible* has remained a little-known text, particularly outside Anglo-American academia.

However, the message behind Grimstone's arguments against using the Scriptures to justify women's inferiority, as expressed in her novel *Character; or, Jew and Gentile*, and Stanton's position when editing *The Woman's Bible*, represent an important contribution to feminist theology. They both call upon women's authority to read and interpret the Bible as rational beings created by God, endowed with reason in the same way and measure as men. They both attempted to reinterpret the Scriptures in order to find religious arguments in favour of the emancipation of women.

3.2 Arguments in favour of women's education

Grimstone also presented arguments in favour of women's education. The main idea she defended was that of the need for proper education for women. Grimstone upheld the idea that character was formed by the conjunction of the different experiences and sensations a person received in their life, giving particular importance to those received in early childhood. For her, character could only be determined, or, as she liked to present it, moulded, by education.

Consequently, the so-called “inherently distinctive differences existing between men and women”, were actually few and “neither mental nor moral ones” (M. L. G. 1834: 101). Instead, Grimstone argued that the alleged distinctions between men and women, which assign reason to the former and feelings to the latter, were to be ascribed to customs and social prejudices, not to any divine design. In her article “Men and Women”, published by *The New Moral World* in 1834, Grimstone argued,

> […] it is the craft of blind guides, not the creative hand of a benign deity, that has made these distinctions. Fortunately for man, the female mind, like his own, is capable of the highest elevation; fortunately for woman, the heart of man, like her own, is susceptible of the tenderest feelings […] I disclaim for my sex the presumed superiority of the heart, as I deny the imputed inferiority of the head (M. L. G. 1834: 102)

She also believed that every human being had the instinct to aspire to perfectibility, a principle that was present in everyone and could be developed in all through education. In her article “Self-Dependence”, published by *The Monthly Repository* in 1835, Grimstone declared,

> Among the principles of creation I perceive that the thing originated is not perfect, but instinct with the principle of perfectibility. This principle, decidedly perceptible in the human being, is latent in all, and through human agency developed in all (M. L. G. 1835b: 597)

This argument is a development of the idea of reason as a gift from God to all human creation. Based on this idea, she also defended every person’s right to seek and acquire knowledge for themselves, and especially women’s right to do so. In her article “Female Education”, published in 1835 by *The Monthly Repository*, Grimstone called for women’s right to access knowledge for and by themselves: “[…] let her not cling from a principle of mercenary dependence […] let her look to nothing but God and herself” (M. L. G. 1835a: 110).

Her appeal was aimed particularly at those who claimed that women were not capable of rational thinking and that every notion, including the love of God, had to pass through a male medium before getting into women’s weaker mind. Grimstone revisited this argument in her series of short stories “Sketches of Domestic Life”, in particular in the story “The Coquette”. In it, Mr. Hervey and Mrs. Walton, who Grimstone described as “a high-minded woman”, discuss the oppressed condition women found themselves in. During their respectful exchange, Mr. Hervey cites the verse “He for God only, she for God in Him” from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to which Mrs. Walton answers as follows,

> Let every being go for himself, or herself, as much as possible to the fountain-head of knowledge—seek, and accept no mediums, if they can help it; the further from the fount the less likely is the stream to be pure […] I assure you, whatever you and Milton may think and say, I do not deem you the most transparent and speckless medium through which we may look ‘through nature up to nature’s God’ (M. L. G. 1835d: 561)

With this confutation, Grimstone was asserting women’s intrinsic equality with men and their right to knowledge and education. If, as Unitarians preached, open knowledge and free inquiry were the true way to God, then everyone, including women, had to be given the right education and instruction to allow them to arrive at rational conclusions.

For Grimstone the differences between men and women, as well as women’s alleged vices, were to be ascribed to the kind of education that each received. In “Self-Dependence”, she declared that the differences between men and women as opposite categories were artificial,

> That striking differences have existed, and do exist, between the sexes, I admit; that they are natural or necessary, I deny. Variety is one of the beautiful laws of nature; by that law each being differs from all other beings —man from man as widely, in a thousand points of power and character, as woman from man, or man from woman. These are natural differences. The general differences which attach to sex *en masse* are artificial differences (M. L. G. 1835b: 601) (italics original to the text).

Grimstone had already presented this argument in her novels. In the Postscript to *Woman’s Love* she had affirmed, “The disproportion of cultivation, encouragement, and that aliment of intellectual energy–freedom, is perhaps fully sufficient to account for the *ostensible* disproportion of mind in the sexes” (Grimstone 1832: 359) (italics original to the text).

Hence, for women to achieve equal standing with men in society, it was necessary for them to access and acquire the right kind of education, which would also allow them to understand God’s message and God’s creation.

3.3 Critique of the contemporary institution of marriage and rejection of the legal fiction of coverture

For Mary Leman Grimstone, the matters of education and marriage were intimately related. As her argument went, for a relationship to work the parties involved needed to agree on certain common principles, values, and interests. However, that commonality could not exist between men and women because the education given to the latter differed, abysmally, from that afforded to the former.

For Grimstone, marriage should not be an economic or political arrangement, but a union of love between partners that consider each other as equals in dealing with the business of life,

> The sympathy of appreciation is surely essential to a union of affection or friendship; but how is this, still less the sympathy of affinity, to exist between beings so oppositely educated as men and women? Were they never destined to meet —were they never called on to co-operate in the business of life—some excuse for such a system might be framed; but when they are called to form the most intimate union, to co-operate in the most important duties, it is impossible not to brand the system with the name of insanity […] (M. L. G. 1835b: 601).

The fact that marriage was supposed to be a union of equals explains Grimstone's objections and arguments against the legal fiction of coverture. Under common law, both in England and its colonies, marriage and married women's legal status were governed by the institution of coverture and the legal fiction of the *femme covert*. According to this legal doctrine, once married the legal personality of a woman was subsumed in that of her husband, becoming one subject under the law. As Zaher states,

> Under coverture, a wife simply had no legal existence […] Any income from property she brought into the marriage was controlled by her husband, and if she earned wages outside the home, those wages belonged to him. If he contracted debts, her property went to cover his expenses […] upon marriage the husband and wife became one—him. (Zaher 2002: 460-61)

Coverture's origins can be traced to medieval English law. As Charles J. Reid explains, is it possible to find vestiges of this legal fiction in several thirteenth-century treaties, and by "the fourteenth century, the English common lawyers began to speak of a married woman as *feme covert* –this term meaning the absorption of the wife's legal personality into that of her husband's" (Reid 2012: 1128) (italics original to the text).

The justification for coverture, which was as much legal as it was ideological, changed over the centuries, "with a wife variously understood to be the dependent subordinate of her husband or, indeed, to have become 'one flesh' with him or one person at law" (Stretton & Kesselring 2013: 4). However, the effects remained the same: married women lost all rights to their property and were considered under the cover of their husbands, which ideologically justified their treatment as subservient and inferior.

One of the arguments that justified coverture was the biblical verse in the Book of Genesis that states: "therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). This justified the principle of unity, according to which the term "one flesh" was to be interpreted as the legal personality of the husband. Most scholars concur in the idea that it was William Blackstone's work, published in 1760, which "served to enshrine the principle of 'unity of person' as being at the core of coverture" (Stretton & Kesselring 2013: 7).

Grimstone rejected the legal fiction of coverture, both in its material and ideological effects. In *Character; or, Jew and Gentile*, Grimstone uses a conversation between Mrs. Melburn and Agnes to highlight the injustices of the institution of marriage, directly referencing Blackstone. When Mrs. Melburn confesses to Agnes that she had authored many works but had had to conceal them in anonymity to keep her earnings, Agnes asks her why she conformed to these injustices. Mrs. Melburn answers that if there were any laws that attempted, in any way, to correct the social wrongs of marriage, she would have appealed to them, but alas, there were none. Agnes passionately agrees with her friend, claiming that laws cannot help them, but that the day will come when men realise that the laws that govern marriage are as evil and ignorant as sorcery,

> […] law only adds insult to injury—mortification to misfortune […]. No, no, keep to the ambuscade of deception, rather than the array of legal justice […] the day will be when men will look back upon it as they do now on sorcery and witchcraft, in spite of all that its apologists, with Blackstone at the head of them, can say in its defence (Grimstone 1833: 95).

Throughout *Character; or, Jew and Gentile* Grimstone continually criticises the marriage laws of her time, using Agnes as her voice. In a discussion between Agnes and Mr. Coverley, Agnes ascribes to habit and custom the indifference with which the institution of marriage is seen, "what but habit could make us regard with indifference anything so tyrannical in structure as the laws of marriage? Woman is a sacrifice to society, and to victimize her is made legal, and is, therefore, safe". When Mr. Coverley tries to rebuke her assertion by citing English law, she reminds him that "laws […] are everywhere made for the strong against the weak" (Grimstone 1833: 146-47).

She also used her articles to deny the principle of unity, which annulled women and made then utterly dependent on their husbands. In "Self-Dependence" Grimstone declared, "I utterly deny the so much talked-of notion of merging self in another or others" (M. L. G. 1835b: 596). She used her series "Sketches of Domestic Life" to redouble her argument. In the short story "The Notable", Grimstone argued,

> the animating principle which has awakened the spirit of the working man, must be brought to bear upon the women of all classes […] in like manner must women find and prove that they were not created to feel and think at secondhand, and hardly that; that the tie which unites them to men does not merge them in their husbands, but that it is for women, as equally essential and indispensable co-agents in the work of human progression, to originate high thoughts and- views, to advance useful and independent objects, and that the feelings of wife, mother, daughter, and sister, may co-exist with those of the philosopher, philanthropist, and patriot (M. L. G. 1835c: 229)

This last quote shows how Grimstone's stern critique of the institution of marriage and the principle of unity is connected to her idea of reason as a gift from God. If women have been created as individuals and rational beings, then the merging of their legal personality to that of their husbands was a contradiction of their nature. To accept women as fully human meant, then, the necessary rejection of the legal fiction of *femme covert*. Only in this manner could women truly develop their God-given reason, which, according to the tenets of Radical Unitarianism, was the only way to understand God's original design.

These three examples show how Grimstone integrated social, religious and cultural arguments to defend women's rights and advocate for their emancipation. They also demonstrate how religious arguments, based on a particular understanding of Christianity, played an important and instrumental role in the defence of women's rights and the vindication of their full humanity.

Grimstone would not have been able to formulate her arguments in favour of women's rights without basing them on the fundamental idea that reason was a gift from God, and that, as such, both men and women had the right to develop it to understand God's message. To do so, women needed to be considered equal to men, had to have access to the same kind of education, and could not be absorbed by their husbands' legal personality upon marriage. Thus, this study proves that the relation between advocating for women's rights and practicing a particular religion is not necessarily a contradictory one. Instead, it shows that the relationship between feminism and religion has been, and still is, far more nuanced and complex that what our modern societies are willing to accept.

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Comedy, Inclusion and the Paradox of Playing with Stereotypes:
Representations and Self-Representations of Muslim Women in British TV Sitcoms and Stand-Up Comedy

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Abstract In recent years, Muslim women have carved out spaces for themselves and become increasingly visible within the British comedy entertainment scene. This can be read in terms of popular cultural spaces becoming more inclusive and open to minority groups. At the same time, as this article will show, comedy representations can often be read in a range of different ways. Taking the stand-up comedy of Shazia Mirza and the BBC sitcom Citizen Khan (2012-2016) as examples, this article examines how comedy representations and self-representations of Muslim women both contest and reproduce stereotypes. This article also reflects on the risks and opportunities that arise from playing with the tensions and contradictions of stereotypes within the power-laden cultural space of comedy.

Keywords comedy, stereotyping, Islam, gender, representation.

To be told you lack a sense of humour can be deeply hurtful, humiliating and even, at times, dehumanizing. Conversely, sharing jokes and moments of laughter together can create powerful feelings of belonging, mutual understanding and joy. Within the field of humour studies, scholars have grappled for over a century with how best to characterize the relationship of humour to power and the place of humour in the politics of inclusion. In the early twentieth century, French philosopher Henri Bergson described humour as a "social corrective" (Bergson 2014), claiming that being laughed at creates feelings of exclusion and humiliation powerful enough to prompt a change in social behaviour. In *Laughter and Ridicule* (2005), Michael Billig argues along similar lines that humour operates (in some cases) as a disciplinary mode

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through which subjects are encouraged to adopt certain norms, and to abandon others. Others see humour more positively, noting its potential to engender solidarity and to allow marginalized[1] groups to contest designations of power (Golozubov 2014; Gilbert 1997). While some groups are often included in humourous contexts, performances and dialogues, others are labelled "humourless". Which groups are considered "humourless" has much to do with existing paradigms of inclusion and exclusion, and who is marked as "Other". This article focuses on one group specifically which has often been Othered in this way, namely Muslim women. I will explain and contextualize this narrative of the "humourless Muslim women" shortly. In broader terms, this article takes humour seriously as a lens through which to explore the shifting frames of marginality, inclusion and diversity politics within which Muslim women are situated in the British context.[2]

The structure of the article will be as follows. I will first situate the scholarship that informs my approach to religion, gender and humour, and specifically the representation of Muslim women. I will then outline the methodological framework of feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) (Lazar 2007) alongside relevant contributions from gender theory, cultural studies and humour studies. In the central section of the article, I will introduce two examples – British TV sitcom *Citizen Khan* (2012-2016) and the work of stand-up comedian Shazia Mirza – which will be discussed in terms of the ways in which comedic representations and self-representations both (and sometimes simultaneously) reproduce and contest dominant cultural frames about Muslim women. In the final section of the article, I will reflect more broadly on what we can learn about the mechanisms of inclusion itself from looking at comedy. What does it mean to be included in humourous discourse? I will suggest that comedy discourses can illuminate the ambivalent ways in which dominant scripts and cultural frames sit alongside contestations of these same scripts and cultural frames. However, this is not to negate the potential of humourous representations and self-representations to amplify marginalized voices and social inclusion, by creating spaces of openness and shared humanity, in which the paradoxical logics and tensions of dominant stereotypes can be exposed.

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[1] The term "marginalized" has its own normative trappings and its use risks buttressing the very boundaries between "self" and "other" this article aims to scrutinize. Here, I use the term specifically as shorthand to describe 'persons and representations which have been excluded from mainstream… narratives' (Thorsen et al 2015: 1).

[2] In using the term "women", I refer to the socially constructed gender category (see Butler 1990). I do not intend to exclude the voices of trans women or reinforce a hierarchy in which cis women are prioritized over trans women. However, in the shows I will examine, I have only encountered representations of cis women. I think it is important to acknowledge this, since the language of "man" or "woman" often risks reproducing trans exclusionary paradigms. There is a clear need for more research into (humour in) representations (and lack thereof) of trans, non-binary and queer lives, but it is beyond the scope of this article to do that work.

1. Positioning “the Muslim woman” in comedy[3]

As communications scholar Jerry Palmer observes, “humour is a fragile thing” (Palmer 1994: 147), whose meanings and effects vary dramatically dependent on the cultural context, and on who is speaking. The humourlessness of women is a recurring trope in popular media, with a long history in public cultural and political discourses. Historically, women who attempted to “gain a democratic share in society” have been “constantly the butt of jokes”, while, at the same time, “women’s possibilities of speaking up humorously have been tightly proscribed… with lasting constraints remaining even today” (Kessel & Merziger 2012: 11). Until recently, media and cultural studies scholar Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore notes, “women’s use of humour tended to be confined to the private sphere” (Kalviknes Bore 2010: 140). This exclusion from public humourous discourse mirrors a more established binary distinction, in which the public sphere is framed as a masculine domain, and the private sphere as a “space for women” (Cady & Fessenden 2013: 9). This framework correlates with a secular model in which a dichotomy is drawn between the “secular, emancipated us” which is associated with the public sphere and the “religious, backward them”, associated with the private sphere (Bracke 2011: 30). This dichotomy has been problematized by numerous prominent scholars in the study of religion and gender in recent years (Scott 2009; Cady and Fessenden 2013), but remains a strong thread in cultural and political discourses on Islam and women’s rights. To situate humour here, cultural historian Sander Gilman notes that “laughing at oneself” has come to be regarded as a “hallmark of modern, [secular] subjectivity” (Gilman 2012: 53). Conversely, “not having a sense of humour” is associated not only with femininity but also “with (strict) religiosity” (Kuipers 2011: 76).

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[3] Where the phrase “the Muslim woman” is used here, it is emphatically *not* used to indicate that such a homogenous, hegemonic category exists. Rather, it is used here to reference a normative discursive frame, into which Muslim women’s performances within comedy spaces are often “read” or assimilated.

At the nexus of these identities (and in a racially marginalized position)[4], the motif of the "humourless Muslim woman" emerges (Kuipers 2011: 75). In contemporary British discourse, and from a longue durée perspective, the prevailing narratives concerning Islam are overwhelmingly negative, centring on securitization and radicalization (Saeed 2016). It is perhaps unsurprising, within this framework, that the prevailing consensus dictates that: "Muslims are humourless and cannot take a joke" (Miles 2015: 169). This motif is evident in British headlines such as "Does Islam have a sense of humour?" (*BBC*, 2007) and "Leave Citizen Khan alone! Po-faced, humourless Muslim protestors are their own worst enemy" (*National Secular Society,* 2012), which unanimously set Islam up as a "humourless" religion.[5] This is especially significant within the British context, where humour can be understood as an important marker of affinity and a determinant for inclusion. In *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities* (2007), cultural studies scholar Andy Medhurst argues that, in the British cultural context, humour is often associated with positive qualities such as humility, intelligence, and friendliness, and seen as an indicator of being less likely to have extreme views (Medhurst 2007). In this context, it is possible to see how the "humourless" framing of Islam corresponds with the "the traditional Orientalist stereotypes of Muslims as political anarchists, and tyrants at home subjugating their women [which] have been disseminated in the media as caricatures" (Ahmed & Donnan 2003: 9).[6]

The "humourless" motif is applied not just to Muslim men, however, but also (and sometimes more rigorously) to Muslim women, whose lives are supposedly "guided by religion, tradition and hierarchy, who never laugh" (Kuipers 2011: 76). Specifically in the context of Muslim women, the themes of oppression and violence tend to take centre stage (Kuipers 2011; Ansari 2004).

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[4] I do not find space in this article to do justice to an intersectional analysis of race, alongside religion and gender, but would point readers towards the excellent PhD thesis "The Performance of Intersectionality on the 21st Century Stand-Up Comedy Stage" (Blackburn, 2018), which brings critical race theory and intersectionality to the fore in an analysis of stand-up comedy in the North American and British contexts.

[5] This framing became particularly prominent following riots and protests against the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons, reprinted across Europe in 2006, and again following the attack on the office of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in 2015, in which 12 people were killed. These violent incidents still colour public discourse and popular imagination concerning the relationship between humour and Islam to the present day. Indeed, when describing my research, I often encounter references to these incidents.

[6] Women who are "too outspoken" are also characterised as "killjoys" (Ahmed 2010). This reflects the complex web of (framings of) permissible behaviour navigated by women in contemporary Western European society.

Beginning from the premise that what and who is deemed “funny” or “unfunny” can have serious implications for the formation of subjects and the politics of inclusion and exclusion, the homogenizing cultural script of the “humourless Muslim woman” has the potential to exclude Muslim women from particular ways of communicating and being seen. This exclusionary cultural script is related to a broader framing of Muslim women in Europe. It is important to emphasize that this script is not static, univocal or without contestations (Hall 1980). However, it does encapsulate many stereotypes about Muslim women as “passive…, subject to patriarchal traditions and lacking any active agency” (Ansari 2004: 265). Echoing Ansari, Margaretha van Es also notes that Muslim women are often essentialized as “sexually repressed” and unable to speak for themselves (van Es 2016: 13) despite having “actively tried to break stereotypes and prejudices” about their identities (van Es 2016: 2). This contemporary discourse of Muslim women as “sexually repressed” and oppressed is linked to the imagined binary between religion as “conservative” and secularism as “liberating” (Cady & Fessenden 2013). At the same time, a contradictory image of the “feminine Other” as a (silent) object of desire also seems to persist in many Western representations of Muslim women (Perry 2013).

In the past decade or so, in contrast with the script of the “humourless Muslim woman” (Kuipers 2011), Muslim women have become increasing visible and carved out spaces for themselves in the British comedy scene. The growing numbers of representations and self-representations of Muslim women within “humour discourses” (Kuipers 2011) are not, however, without their varying degrees of attachment to structures of power and normativity. By engaging with public iterations of humour by and about Muslim women, this article will explore gender norms concerning Muslim women that are variously reinforced and contested under the guise of “only joking”. In so doing, this article will grapple with the questions that arise from these comedy performances; what does it mean for Muslim women to become visible in comedy spaces, in terms of dynamics of power, inclusion and cultural diversity? How optimistic should we be about reading this growing representation of Muslim women in comedy as part of a move within popular entertainment towards reflecting Britain’s religious and cultural diversity? In order to critically explore these broader questions, I focus on the ways in which dominant exclusionary scripts and stereotypes are variously reflected, contested, and reformulated in the cases of *Citizen Khan* (2012-2016) and the stand-up of Shazia Mirza.

2. Theory meets methodology

In this section, I bring together approaches from cultural studies, gender theory and humour theory as thinking tools which contribute to developing a methodological approach to comedy material. Alongside these approaches, I am influenced by a feminist model of critical discourse analysis. One criticism that is often levelled at critical discourse analysis as a methodology is that it means different things to different researchers, and can be coupled with a vast range of methods. While this is, in a sense, an opportunity, allowing for scholarly innovation in combining different methods and theoretical lenses, it can also make “methodology sections” on critical discourse analysis feel rather abstract. Rather than shying away from this problem, I begin by situating critical discourse analysis theoretically, alongside key concepts in cultural studies, gender theory and humour theory. I will describe the methods used in this research more concretely, but first I invite the reader to join me in this interdisciplinary exploration.

As a starting point, put very concisely, critical discourse analysis is a methodology inspired by Michel Foucault, who famously argued that discourse is a mode of representation that delimits the production of knowledge and identity (Foucault 1972). The categories that make up discourse “do not come about by themselves” (Foucault 1972: 25), but rather develop and change over time subject to the social and political contexts in which meaning and category construction occurs. These contexts are always intractably tied to structures of power. In “The Order of Discourse”, Foucault explores the relationship of discourses to power and inclusion: “We know quite well that we do not have the right to… speak of just anything in any circumstances… and that not everyone has the right to speak of anything whatever” (Foucault, 1981: 52).

Following in the tradition of Michel Foucault, Michelle Lazar develops the methodology of feminist critical discourse analysis (henceforth FCDA) to expose the various “ways in which frequently taken-for-granted assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated and challenged in different contexts and communities” (Lazar 2007: 142), specifically in the context of gendered power structures. Lazar situates gender as a form of hegemonic ideological structure. Like other ideological structures cemented in social discourse, it does not “appear as domination” but rather “as largely consensual and acceptable to most” (Lazar 2007: 147). Here, Lazar is influenced by the prolific philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which gender is theorized as a social and cultural construct that is learned and embodied through repetition. The book is characterized by a "dogged effort to "denaturalize" gender" (Butler 1990: *xx*), since the naturalization of gender is itself a mechanism of power and exclusion. This concept of naturalization is also taken up by cultural theorist Stuart Hall, who coined the phrase "naturalized codes" to describe discursive frames and categories that are "so widely distributed in a specific… community or culture, and… learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed… but to be 'naturally' given" (Hall 1980: 55). In Lazar's FCDA, she underlines the complexity of gender and power relations, noting that difference and diversity among women is an important insight for FCDA. The power asymmetries within discourse are shaped not only by gender but also by the intersections between race, class, sexuality and religion, in which some combinations of identities are "naturalized" while others mark individuals out for exclusion and "Othering".[7] An important point here is that the academic researcher does not exist outside these structures of power asymmetry. More specifically, those who study humour are "de facto members of specific normative communities and have their own […] stereotypes, which may influence not only their own research interests, but also their [...] analyses and results" (Tsakona 2017: 198). In exploring comedy representations and self-representations of Muslim women, I am conscious of my own positionality as a feminist, as a native English speaker raised in a British context,[8] and as a cis white middle class woman with no religious affiliation, and left-leaning political alignments. To navigate this question of positionality, I acknowledge my subjectivity and engage reflectively with the ways in which it inevitably informs my analysis. Writing in the first person is one step towards making my own embodied and social position visible.

Having outlined the theoretical frame of critical discourse analysis, I will now turn to the specific question of analysing comedy discourse. This will lead to a brief explanation of the specific methods that were used in producing the analysis in this article. One crucial feature of humourous discourse is its potential to operate on many levels at the same time. As humour scholar Anton Zijderveld puts it, "Ambiguity is the essence of humour" (Zijderveld 1983: 55). By virtue of its polysemic qualities – its ability to say multiple things at once – a joke often "pivots on a point of its precarious balance" (Conway 2017: 27). The precarity to which Conway refers here may be explained by the fact that the different layers of comedy discourse often reflect conflicting cultural values and ideals. Needless to say, from a methodological perspective, this presents both opportunities and challenges. Humour is particularly intriguing from the point of view of discourse analysis precisely because it can operate on different levels at once, and these levels may reveal conflicting cultural values and norms. At the same time, the researcher has their work cut out in analysing this complex form of data. In analysing my data, I followed Lazar's suggestion to scrutinize the relationship between different semiotic resources (between language and images). I produced multi-modal transcriptions, in which I noted visual frames (such as panning shots, jump cuts, and particular objects in-shot) as well as sound and text-script columns.[9] From here, I identified particular sections of interest in the transcripts, and developed my analysis, mapping it against reviews and interviews with the performers. This approach follows the examples of Conway (2017) and Miles (2015), who conduct CDA of representations of Islam in comedy shows and media dialogue about these shows.[10] Having now situated the theoretical and methodological context of this article, in the next section, I use two examples to disentangle some of the ways in which dominant cultural frames regarding Muslim women are (sometimes simultaneously) reinforced and contested in comedic representations and self-representations of Muslim women.

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[7] See Kimberley Crenshaw's introduction to the concept of intersectionality (1989). For a more recent collection on the concept of "intersectionality", see Crenshaw's *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings* (2017).

[8] This is a relevant factor, given that national and cultural identity, upbringing and native language can significantly shape humour style and taste (e.g., Adler-Nissen & Tsinovoi 2018).

3. Sitcoms as representation: The case of *Citizen Khan*

The British TV sitcom *Citizen Khan* (henceforth *CK*) (2012-2016) is one example of a show in which Muslim women are represented by a team of screenwriters, producers and actors with varying degrees of connection to the community they represent.[11] It is worth noting that *CK* was produced by the BBC. According to sociologist and humour studies scholar Christie Davies, what is aired by public broadcasting services like the BBC has far-reaching implications in terms of "whose tastes in comedy shall prevail" (Davies, in Bucaria & Barra 2016: 38). In recent years, Davies adds, the BBC has tended to favour relatively "traditional" styles of sitcoms, focusing on family life and avoiding taboo topics. In *CK,* we see this pattern reproduced in some respects. The show depicts the everyday lives of the self-proclaimed "community leader" Mr. Khan, his wife and his daughters Shazia and Alia. While Mr. Khan is the show's central protagonist, *CK's* comedy often derives from the ways in which his wife and daughters deal with his delusions of authority. The show was written and produced by Adil Ray, a Muslim raised in Birmingham to a Pakistani-Punjabi father and Kenyan mother, alongside Richard Pinto and Anil Gupta, who had both previously worked on other shows representing Muslim communities, including *Goodness Gracious Me* (1998-2001) and *The Kumars at No. 42* (2001-2006). Given that there were no Muslim women involved in the writing of the show, it may be analysed through the lens of representation as opposed to self-representation. At the same time, of course, the actresses playing these parts also make choices about how to represent their characters and deliver their lines. Furthermore, as Maya Sondhi (who plays Shazia) comments in an interview, "The writers… write for our voices… They know the way we are. So there are… elements of us going in there as well" (*BBC Asian Radio Network* 2014). However, she also adds that Bhavna Limbachia (who plays Shazia's younger sister Alia) is nothing like her character. This is particularly notable given that many viewers and critics of the show are particularly interested in how Alia is represented.

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[9] See Moernaut, Mast, & Pauwels (2020) for an introductory outline of multimodal analysis methods.

[10] While these studies provide useful examples in developing my methodology, they differ in their focus on male Muslim comedians in the North American context.

[11] It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss further examples in-depth, but it is worth noting that the BBC began airing *Man Like Mobeen* (2017-), a show also set in Birmingham and centring a Muslim male protagonist and his younger sister, the year after *CK* came off air.

In the show's first episode, we are first introduced to Alia when she hears Mr. Khan walking up the stairs and immediately stops taking pouting selfies on her phone and rushes to cover up "a glamorous, tight-fitting and revealing outfit" (Ahmed 2013: 94) with the hijab and hide a fashion magazine under the Qur'an. Mr. Khan is entirely taken in by the performance and delighted at his daughter's display of piety. This scene alone prompted 185 complaints from viewers, who felt that this representation "ridiculed" Islam (Revoir 2012) and reproduced the stereotype of the "oppressed Muslim woman". One journalist responded to this representation in the following rather hyperbolic terms:

> The agony which some Muslim women […] find themselves in, hailing from conservative and teetotal families, which preach a very coy and shameful attitude towards sex, can generate confused notions of sexuality like Alia's (Lais 2012).

Throughout *CK,* Alia's representation appears, on one level, to *contest* the stereotype of the sexually repressed, modestly dressed Muslim women - she goes to parties, has boyfriends, and dresses "provocatively". At the same time, however, the humour of her representation derives from this double life, in which she has to play the part of the "modest daughter" for her father. This can lead viewers and commentators to filter Alia's representation through a hegemonic understanding of Muslim women as sexually repressed and in need of saving (Bracke 2011; Abu-Lughod 2013). Later in his review, the journalist Hasnet Lais goes back on his earlier position, suggesting instead that Alia is emblematic of "blow[ing] the whistle" on a culture in which "opportunities to discuss sexuality are closed" (Lais 2012). This interpretation also goes beyond what we actually see in *CK*. When Alia misleads her father, the audience shows their approval with laughter, but we are not privy to many aspects of Alia's "love life" or any part of her life outside the Khan home. Indeed, the same can be said of Mrs. Khan and Shazia, who are also most often seen inside the Khan home.[12] This seems to reproduce the dominant cultural frame in which religious women in general (Cady and Fessenden 2013) and Muslim women in particular (van Es 2016), are associated with the private sphere and domesticity.

Later in the show, the theme of shame and embarrassment around sexuality arises again, this time when Alia's sister Shazia finds herself embroiled in an unexpected scandal, after Mr. Khan accidentally starts a rumour that she had an affair with a family friend, Imran Parvez, before meeting her fiancé. In the scene in which Shazia first learns about this rumour, Mr. Khan explains the situation in the following euphemistic language:

> Mr. Khan: Your mother thinks that you and Imran Parvez, you know...
> Shazia: No, I don't know.
> Mr. Khan: You know. The thing.
> Shazia: What thing?
> Mrs. Khan: The thing! The thing!
> Shazia: You mean sex?
> Mr. Khan (horrified): Shhh!

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[12] Admittedly, it is a common trope of TV sitcoms to situate most scenes within a few settings. This may be a budgeting decision, to minimise costs on set production, or as a practical choice in order to avoid long interludes between scenes in front of a live audience. However, in this case, the gendered aspect seems to hold, since Mr. Khan often has scenes in the mosque setting, where he meets with other men.

Even the word "sex" provokes a silencing reaction in Mr. Khan. This prompts laughter from the audience, who see Mr. Khan's response as comically puritanical. By contrast with Mr. Khan's embarrassment, Shazia is pragmatic and impatient at her parents' inability to speak openly about sex. This representation stands in stark contrast with the stereotype of the "oppressed Muslim woman" who is unable to speak for herself. Instead, Shazia rails against her parents' responses to the idea that she might have had previous sexual partners. "What if I did go out with Imran Parvez?" she asks. "What if I went out with half of Sparkhill? Would that matter to you?" Mr. Khan interjects with, "Which half are we talking about?" prompting Shazia to respond: "That's not the point! My body is my own... I can do what I want with it. It shouldn't matter to Amjad what I've done in the past, and it shouldn't matter to you either."

In making this declaration, Shazia echoes a common Western understanding of sexual emancipation and bodily agency. Her parents reluctantly agree but this is undercut by the fact that she is repeatedly shamed throughout the episode for an imagined dalliance with Imran Parvez. Mrs. Khan is particularly distressed at the idea, exclaiming: "Do you know what it means to have a daughter who has been with other boys before she's married? She'll be ruined! We'll all be finished here… over, dead and buried."

While Shazia (like Alia) does not conform to the dominant frame of the "sexually repressed Muslim woman", nor is she fully included in the humourous discourse of the show, rather often being represented as earnest and sensible. Still more so, as the quote above reflects, Mrs. Khan is often represented as a figure of insecurity, whose main concern is with preserving status within the community and keeping her family out of trouble. Much of the episode's humour derives from the drama of Shazia's humiliation, and Mrs. Khan and Shazia are both often the butt of the joke. The representation of a "prudish" approach to female sexuality from Mr. and Mrs. Khan also frequently prompts laughter from the show's audience. This begs the question: how should we interpret the representations of Alia and Shazia in *CK?* Both are, in some ways, complicating a particular "dominant cultural order" (Hall 1980) in which Muslim women have been discursively framed as sexually repressed. At the same time, the humour of the representations of both Alia and Shazia often falls back on the audience's awareness of the stereotype that Muslim women are "sexually repressed" and confined to the private sphere. In their analysis of TV sitcoms, Chiara Bucaria and Luca Barra argues that comedy thrives off a "fruitful duplicity" (Bucaria and Barra 2016: 11), at the same time "follow[ing] the rules and break[ing] them" to bring "fresh and original perspectives into a common ground of habits and repetitions" (Bucaria & Barra 2016: 10). When seen from this point of view, the seemingly contradictory ways in which Shazia and Alia both "break" and "follow" the rules appear productive, in illuminating the complexity, plurality and internal paradoxes of dominant stereotypes and frames about Muslim women in British discourse.

The picture is further complicated by media and cultural studies scholar Anamik Saha, who argues that *CK* calls for the inclusion of Muslim voices in mainstream British culture precisely *through* its "very orthodox take on the genre... of British situation comedy" (Saha 2013: 99). Unlike representations of Muslim culture on "serious" TV that are "still mostly exoticized and orientalized... there is something potentially counter-hegemonic in situating a comedy programme about Pakistanis squarely in the ever-so-British tradition of BBC sitcoms" (Saha 2013: 99). Within this "ever-so-British tradition", the recycling of stereotypes is a prominent comedic strategy. Thus, rather paradoxically, the use of the hegemonic discursive model of British sitcoms may operate to create a counter-hegemonic statement, calling for the inclusion of Muslim voices in mainstream British comedy culture. Film studies scholar Daniela Berghahn takes a similar but rather more optimistic approach, arguing that sitcoms about minority groups tend to invite "majority and minority culture audiences that recognise that families… [wherever they come from] have a great deal in common" (Berghahn, in Thorsen et al. 2015: 111).

It is worth developing the question of marginality and representation a little further here. Since the advent of the British school of cultural studies (founded by Stuart Hall, among others, in the 1960s), an emphasis has been placed on examining cultural representations with a view to moving "the margins into the centre, the outside into the inside" (Hall 1990: 10). However, when a group or individual is labelled "marginal", "we must be aware of what is being inscribed as central" (Thorsen et al. 2015: 1). By focusing on the family (as *CK* does), groups that are sometimes placed in "the margins" take on a new representation of shared experience and similarity, becoming, in a sense, "central". This model of challenging "Othering" by emphasizing similarities is not without its limitations, however. In her semiautobiographical work *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989), bell hooks observes how often ways of talking back to dominant or ruling groups are co-opted into the language and frame of the dominant group: "It becomes easy to speak about what that group wants to hear, to describe and define experience in a language compatible with existing images and ways of knowing, constructed within social frameworks that reinforce domination" (hooks 1989: 29).

Saha's observation concerning sitcoms as part of an "ever-so-British tradition" begs the question of to what extent comedy of this kind can move beyond "existing images and ways of knowing", which would include the dominant cultural frame of Muslim women as "oppressed". In a more recent article, Sarah Bracke similarly observes that "different ways of talking back, and the different subjects they foster, continue to rely, albeit it in different ways, on the terms of debate" (Bracke 2011: 44). It might be argued that, in the case of representations like those of Shazia, Alia and Mrs. Khan in *CK,* the dominant "terms of debate" retain a strong presence. In the next section, I turn my attention to stand-up comedy as a (possible) vehicle for self-representation that moves beyond the reproduction of norms.

4. Stand-up as self-representation: Shazia Mirza

In *The Politics of British Stand-Up Comedy: The New Alternative,* Sophie Quirk describes stand-up as a transformative act of "storytelling as community-building and expectation-setting" (Quirk 2018: 8). In her analysis of comedy as "cultural critique", Joanne Gilbert argues that women in stand-up comedy often "rhetorically construct and perform their marginality onstage" (Gilbert 1997: 317). Keeping in mind these two characterisations of stand-up comedy, the potential cultural significance of stand-up comedy as a space in which a Muslim woman can write her own script and represent herself becomes apparent. Shazia Mirza is one of the few "high-profile" Muslim women in stand-up comedy in the UK, and has been active on the comedy circuit since 2001. For this reason, she will be subject of analysis in this section, although it is important to note that she is by no means the only Muslim woman working in British stand-up comedy.[13]

In this section, I will begin by focusing on Mirza's 2016 show *The Kardashians Made Me Do It* (henceforth *TKMMDI*). *TKMMDI* is a comedy set inspired by a real news story about three London schoolgirls who left Britain to join ISIS in Syria. Specifically, in the set, Mirza describes these young women as "repressed, rebellious, horny teenage girls" enticed into joining "the One

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[13] Take, for example, the work of comedians Fatiha el-Ghorri, who recently performed on popular British TV chat show *The Jonathan Ross Show* and Sadia Azmat, whose credits include stand-up set *I Am Not Malala* (2014) and comedy podcast *No Country for Young Women* (2018-2020 BBC Sounds).

Direction of Islam for no-guilt, halal sex of which Allah approves" (Mirza 2016). On the one hand, this narrative in Mirza's comedy seems to echo Lais' framing of Muslim women like *CK's* Alia as sexually repressed. On the other, however, Mirza's comedy counters this framing through her own comedy and openness when talking about "taboo" topics related to female sexual desire. At the beginning of her *TKMMDI* set*,* Mirza deliberately positions herself as a Muslim woman, and sets the tone for the show with the line, "These days as a Muslim woman you get an award just for leaving the house" (Mirza 2016). This is, perhaps, especially important given the sensitive content of the show, and opens up space for Mirza to play on her identity as a Muslim woman in relation to the themes of sexuality and radicalization. For example, she brings her own lived experience into contact with the news story in the following vignette:

> My mum can't find me anyone to marry. My friend Matthew looks at me with great concern and says, "You're not thinking of becoming a Jihadi bride are you?" Would I do that? […] The sunsets in Syria are meant to be very romantic […]. I'd get a husband, wouldn't have to work, and would definitely get a place in heaven. Yes, I'd miss my hair straighteners and hot pants, but that's a small price to pay. (Mirza 2016).

Here, Mirza pre-empts some of the stereotypes her audience may hold about Muslim women as "vulnerable-fanatic[s]" (Saeed 2016: 2), prone to becoming Jihadi brides, or solely aspiring to "get a husband" and not have to work. She also references the stereotype that Muslim women's marriages are arranged by their parents, while at the same time satirizing the Western gendered stereotypes that women are easily ensnared by romantic sunsets, and concerned only with being able to straighten their hair and wear hot pants, even when deciding to move to Syria to join ISIS. When defending the show against critics who found it too controversial a topic for comedy, Mirza invoked her identity as a British Muslim woman to legitimize her performance.

Thus, while Mirza has stated in several interviews that she does not want to be typecast as a female Muslim comedian (Lockyer & Pickering 2005), she also uses her identity strategically as a tool to gain access to comedy spaces. In the promotional brochure for the show, Mirza is quoted as saying, "my life was exactly the same as these girls growing up, but I rebelled in the normal way - I dyed my hair pink and took drugs. I didn't join a terrorist organization" (Mirza 2018). By simultaneously identifying with the audience ("rebelling in the normal way") and with the girls who joined ISIS (in terms of upbringing), Mirza negotiates and blurs the space between "insider" and "outsider". Again, after describing her conversation with her friend Matthew about becoming a Jihadi bride, Mirza deploys this strategy, reassuring her audience that: "It's a joke, obviously. They wouldn't have me. They're not looking for an in-house comedian. I'm 30 years too old and when it's hot I get my ankles out for the lads."

Mirza's colloquial tone here creates a sense of familiarity with the audience. She also posits an alternative to the dominant cultural discourse concerning Muslim women, by playfully representing herself as an agent of her own sexuality, who "gets her ankles out for the lads". At the same time, however, this alternative representation resonates with another norm about female sexuality (as something performed for male gratification) that also circulates in British public discourse. In her comedy, Mirza walks a fine line between playing sarcastically with stereotypical frameworks and going along with them. While stand-up comedy offers a "performative space within which to discursively situate the self in… opposition to collective categories" (Smith 2018: 90), this is not a simple matter. When looking at Mirza's comedy career as a whole, we see still more clearly how complicated questions of inclusion and self-representation in stand-up comedy are.

In one of her early sets, Shazia Mirza jokes that "My parents really want me to get married, but the thing is that Muslim men don't want to marry me, because I speak" (Mirza 2005). Later in the same set, Mirza adds: "I'm looking forward to my wedding day… I can't wait to meet my husband" (Mirza 2005). These jokes are received with laughter and applause and crop up in many positive reviews of her comedy. In an interview, Mirza references this tendency towards praising Muslim women who "speak out" and observes that she is often treated as a "novelty" because "in a comedy club people have never really heard a Muslim woman's point of view" (Lockyer & Pickering 2005: 123). In a sense, Mirza is rewarded (with career advancement) for (re)producing a particular gendered image of Islam that draws on secular sensibilities and narratives (e.g., the Muslim woman who lacks agency and only meets her husband on her wedding day). At other times, however, as we saw in *TKMMDI*, Mirza also uses her audience's expectations to her advantage, creating subversive, humorous moments through the perceived incongruity of her status as an outspoken Muslim comedian. At times, her references to stereotypes are so over the top that her sarcasm is clear, but in other moments, her attitude towards the stereotypes she uses is more ambiguous. In sum, Mirza seems to experiment with different gradations along a continuum between repeating and contesting stereotypes, but to remain silent regarding stereotypes is rarely an option. This resonates with a broader point, which will now be developed further in the concluding section of this article; namely, that navigating tensions seems inherent in the humour of those who are marginalized and/or framed as "Other", who may laugh back but will always be expected to speak about, and thus risk reiterating, "Othering" stereotypes in contemporary comedy spaces (Weaver 2010).

3. Conclusions: blurred boundaries and productive tensions

As I mentioned at the outset of this article, Muslim women are increasingly being represented and representing themselves in comedy spaces. This should, in theory, mean that Muslim women are increasingly included in a more diverse range of cultural discourses and that the "humourless" frame fades over time. It is too early to say – and very difficult to measure – the extent to which this is the case. What is already clear is that the humourous discourses that emerge out of these comedy representations and self-representations cannot simply be labelled as either inclusive or as reproducing exclusionary stereotypes. In a sense, it might be argued that stand-up comedians like Shazia Mirza reimagine social reality in ways unavailable within "serious" forms of discourse. This reimagining often takes the form of combining typically distinct themes and categories of identity, and playing on their (imagined) congruence for comedic effect. In achieving this reimaging, Mirza's explicit self-positioning as a Muslim woman speaking from personal, lived experiences is crucial, in allowing her to play with, and contest, stereotypes for comedic effect. Having said this, Mirza's comedy can also be interpreted as reinforcing a binary framing between "oppression" on the one hand as conformity to "traditional" norms (marrying young, having children), and "emancipation" on the other, as making "non-conventional" choices (in Mirza's case, being a comedian and remaining single). Furthermore, when comedians are invited to perform first and foremost as Muslim women, and expected to speak on what are imagined to be the main issues concerning Muslim women, self-representation in stand-up comedy remains entangled with the dominant cultural frame. At the same time, when Muslim women gain access to comedy spaces, they are invited to "be the laughers rather than the laughed-at" (Gilbert 1997: 328). We should not underestimate the significance of this shift, in terms of changing dynamics of power and contesting the prevailing politics of inclusion and exclusion from public comedy spaces.

In scripted comedies like *CK,* we see Muslim women represented through the lens of male writers. Characters like Shazia, Alia and Mrs. Khan are written into supporting roles, and not always fully developed. Comedy representations, in the context of sitcoms perhaps still more than stand-up comedy, risk being transposed back into dominant cultural frames (for example, when stereotypes are referenced tongue-in-cheek, but this can be read by the audience as reinforcing their own stereotypes or pre-existing biases). At the same time, comedic representations of Muslim women in the family context in *CK* also engage tongue-in-cheek with the stereotype of the Muslim woman "oppressed" by male family members. Mr. Khan is not, in fact, the powerful patriarch that he thinks he is, but is rather repeatedly outwitted by his wife and daughters. The show therefore opens up a more nuanced discussion, in which the ambiguities and emotional complexities behind norms around "freedom" or "oppression" shine through, while the prevailing stereotypes about Muslim women are not ignored. The deconstruction of stereotypes about the "Muslim woman" in TV sitcoms will never be a simple or straightforward matter, since the boundaries between challenging and reproducing stereotypes are often blurred and hard to pin down in humourous discourse. However, one strength of both sitcoms like *CK* and stand-up like Mirza's lies in their ability to transgress constructions of difference through representations of complex family relationships (father-daughter, sister-sister and so on) that almost anyone can relate to in some way. In this sense, comedy is a valuable medium for cultural discourses of inclusion and diversity, which can create spaces of individual expression and shared humanity.

To close, despite the frustrations it may bring to the researcher, it is ultimately the ambiguity of comedy that makes it such a fascinating and fruitful topic of research. Lived experience is full of tensions, ambiguities and contradictions, perhaps especially for marginalized groups. Representation and self-representation in cultural productions often involves a dilution, summarisation or simplification of identity and lived experience to create a coherent social and cultural narrative. However, in the case of comedy, the tensions, ambiguities and contradictions between lived experience and how one is positioned as a subject are often the topic of the joke. It is my hope that this article reflects the value of taking humourous representations and self-representations of marginalized groups seriously, as an invaluable cultural tool for nuanced reflection on the politics of inclusion, and the ways in which dominant cultural stereotypes can be experienced, reproduced and contested.

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"She did not come from his rib": Questioning Agency and Empowerment in Islamic Feminism

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Abstract The aim of this article is to address the Western feminist gaze towards the Muslimwoman, a neologism miriam cooke[1] (2007) invented, which shares the same features of the Third World Woman depicted by Mohanty (1988). The idea is to shed light on productive ways of relating to religion when it comes to Islamic Feminism in particular. My argumentation proceeds as follows: after a brief introduction on the relationship between gender and religion nowadays, as a starting point for my analysis I will illustrate how religion can be employed as a source of agency and its empowering character. Agency has always been conceptualised as a form of resistance and subversion against power, however, other scholars suggest different perspectives. I will introduce and discuss them to deconstruct the idea that every religious woman needs to be saved. I will proceed by deconstructing the "Muslimwoman" neologism to provide a decolonial and intersectional reading of the relationship between gender and religion. To conclude, I will draw from the tools provided by Asma Lamrabet's reading of the Qur'an to explore the decolonial power of a pious but critical religious practice.

Keywords gender; religion; agency; decoloniality; Islamic Feminism.

1. Introduction

Before delving into the main topic of this essay, it is worth having a look at the relationship between gender and religion nowadays, a highly controversial one. As Ursula King affirms in *Gender, Religion and Diversity – Cross Cultural Perspectives* the gender-critical turn in religious studies is recent:

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[1] The author spells her name in lower case.

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> It has been rightly pointed out that 'some fields of study are less receptive to feminist perspectives, and feminists in these areas have had to spend significant amounts of time and energy convincing their androcentric colleagues that their theoretical concerns are valid. The study of religion has been one of those disciplines resistant to feminist thought'. (Juschka 2001: 1, qtd. in King 2005: 5)

Nevertheless, the gender-critical turn was able to provide religious studies with new interdisciplinary and cross-cultural methodologies and a critical, self-reflective awareness of situated, embodied subjects. However, some aspects of the relationship between gender and religion are affected by what King calls a *double-blindness,* namely the fact that humanities remain religion-blind in certain aspects, and religious studies remain gender-blind. The author believes that unless the gender-critical turn is made, the embeddedness of gender throughout religion makes it hard to identify it and separate one from the other. Other than the religion blindness or gender-blindness there is also:

> a kind of feminist 'blindness' of, or resistance to, the importance of religion for women. On the other hand, there is a 'religious paradigm' type of feminist studies in which women are seen mainly through the lens of religion, especially in research done by Western scholars on Muslim countries. (Vuola 2001, qtd. in Salem 2013: 1)

Therefore, if we add the layer of diversity, or 'otherness', the question becomes even more complex:

> There is the multiple 'otherness' of religious differences within and across specific cultures; there is the 'otherness' of diverse methods and approaches in understanding such differences; there is the 'otherness' of one gender for another, especially the 'otherness' of women for men, as traditionally understood, and the 'otherness' of sexual orientation, as highlighted in some of the critical perspectives of this book. The social and political violence exercised by the west towards the 'otherness' of 'nonwestern' cultures, whether defined as imperialism, orientalism, or neocolonialism, has come under fierce criticism. (King 2005: 3)

It is this 'otherness' that I intend to address when it comes to Western Feminism and the "Muslimwoman" in particular. Muslim women are often portrayed as submissive beings, victims of a patriarchal tradition that they embrace without being aware of their subaltern condition. In this essay, I would like to explore the notion of agency to expand its meaning and adapt it to different historical and socio-cultural contexts. In particular, the questions that come to mind in the reflection on gender, religion and Muslim women are the following: how can religion represent a source of agency and empowerment, considering that many view it as a source of oppression which contrasts directly with feminist values? What do we really mean by agency? In what ways can Islam empower women? In what ways can religious practice support decolonization? In what way can feminism and religion cooperate to create a decolonial practice? Can feminism really be intersectional when such an important part of so many women's identity as religion is dismissed? I believe it makes sense to address this topic because, as King states in the following paragraph, religion is an important cultural toolkit:

> Religions have provided myths and symbols of origin and creation; they offer narratives of redemption, healing and salvation; they encompass 'way-out' eschatological Utopias, but also express the deepest human yearnings for wholeness and transcendence; they are captivated by the lure of the divine and the all-consuming, all-transforming fire of the spirit. In and through all these, religions have created and legitimated gender, enforced, oppressed and warped it, but also subverted, transgressed, transformed and liberated it (King 2005: 8)

I argue that shedding a light on Islam as an ethical practice brings us closer to the voice of those women who engage with it as a cultural toolkit, often building their identity on it. To do so I will address the question of the feminist gaze which, as Zine states, during the colonial period led to the same exoticisation as the male gaze:

> The continuity of colonial and Orientalist scholarship in contemporary representations construct Muslim women as a universal, ahistorical, and undifferentiated category who become essentialized through the uniqueness of their difference. Eurocentric discourses on Muslim women serve the continuing political intent of justifying western superiority and domination. This form of academic imperialism sets up a binary analytical framework that juxtaposes the West's "liberated" women with Islam's "oppressed" women. (Zine 2002: 12)

As Asmaa Lamrabet states in *Women and Men in the Qur'an*, it is the inclination for this critique, to be aimed almost exclusively towards Islam, that must be rejected, not the criticism itself, which may be fair. The risk is to project onto Muslim women the same features that characterise the Thirld World Woman in the eyes of Western feminists. As Lamrabet affirms, women are not oppressed by Islam as a spiritual message, they are, rather, oppressed by the interpretations of male Muslim scholars and exegeses that usurped the sacred book and converted it into inextricable religious regulations. Moreover, as the author explains: “the discourse on women’s rights in Islam is simplistic because it systematically forces them into particular frames of reference—rights, duties, and status.” (Lamrabet 2018: 2). Such a selective approach is limited and does not tell us enough about the relationship between women and Islam, their spiritual practice or their own effort to recover the egalitarian call of the Qur’an. The point that I am trying to reach is that feminism cannot be intersectional if we do not engage with this topic from a decolonial perspective. Can we really call it a gender-critical turn in religion studies if we do not address the impact of the feminist gaze on Muslim women? As Jasmine Zine explains in “Between Orientalism and Fundamentalism: Muslim Women and Feminist Engagement”, after 9/11:

> Muslim women navigate between both racialized and gendered politics that variously script the way their bodies and identities are narrated, defined and regulated. Located within this dialectical dynamic, the rhetoric of Muslim women’s liberation is all too often caught up in the vast undercurrents of ideological extremism on the one hand, and racism and Islamophobia on the other. Muslim women’s feminist praxis is shaped and defined within and against these discursive terrains. (Zine 2016: 27)

Starting from this assumption, I argue that Islamic feminists had to engage in a decolonial practice in order to de-construct all the orientalist or fundamentalist assumptions that were assigned to their lifestyles and bodies. When I mention decolonial practice I mean the methodologies provided by feminist theory to create, with the words of Margaret A. McLaren:

> A sense of historical consciousness and specificity; a commitment to liberatory practices and values; and an awareness of the effects of colonization not only as political, historical, and economic forces but also as effects on consciousness, theories, research practices, epistemological frameworks, and ways of knowing. (McLaren 2017: 13)

Islamic Feminism is a multi-faceted, trans-national movement that takes the form of an anti-patriarchal reading of the sacred text, the *ʾaḥādīth* and related interpretations. The main thesis of Islamic feminism is that the Qur’an affirms the principle of equality among all human beings, but the practice of such equality has been hindered and subverted by patriarchal ideas. Islamic feminism may seem like a contradiction to many; for many feminists in the Western world, Islam and feminism inhabit two mutually exclusive spaces, but, in fact, it is a movement of women who have maintained their religious beliefs while promoting an egalitarian ethic of Islam using verses from the Qur’an that support women in their struggle for their rights. Islamic feminists argue that there can be a feminist reading of Islamic theology and that patriarchal interpretations of the Qur’an and the *ʾaḥādīth* can be effectively refuted by a feminist counter interpretation.

Several Islamic feminists, Arab and non-Arab, have continually argued that equality is deeply rooted in Islamic ethics. They read and grasp a different message in the sacred text from that grasped by proponents of an orthodox androcentric Islam. These Muslim women work within a system that marginalizes them, but in the process, they are becoming visible and audible. Islamic feminists insist that gender discrimination has a social, rather than a natural or religious origin, and they are not afraid to address the colonial component of it. I argue that the work they conduct, starting from a situated experience, is a form of decolonial practice in the sense that they affirm their identity and desire as Muslim women and fight the androcentric interpretation of the Sacred book, they also deconstruct the Western feminist gaze making their feminist theory and practice intersectional. As they express their voices as Muslim women and as decolonial feminists, they expand the notion of agency and freedom situating it in their own historical and socio-religious contexts. Many Western feminists believe that Islamic feminists use religion in a strategic way to reach extra-religious goals. I argue that their practice is also an authentic and conscious affirmation of their identity.

2. Agency and Freedom

In her article “Doing Religion in a Secular World” the scholar Orit Avishai offers a reading of the concept of agency that challenges the Western idea that religious feminists utilize religion in a strategic way in order to further extra-religious ends. According to Avishai, religion can be perceived as an inquiry for authentic religious subjecthood. Her intention is to go beyond the binary view whereby agency in the framework of religion can only be associated with a purposeful conduct in which a subject represents a strategic agent or a passive target of religious discourses. Avishai believes that a religious lifestyle can be the reflection of a mode of being, the performance of a religious identity. Moreover, according to the author, religion enables individuals to face the challenges of contemporary life. The scholar proceeds by affirming that dichotomizing subordination and subversion equates agency with resistance. However, as Saba Mahmood explains in “Feminist Theory, Agency and the Liberatory Subject” (2006), this idea of agency limits our understanding of religious women’s sense of self and projects that are not imbued in a nonliberal way of thinking. If agency, identified with the political and moral autonomy of the subject, is only located in the face of power, then lots of women are left out. Mahmood strongly believes agency can be conceptualised as “the capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (Mahmood 2001: 203), therefore it is only after detaching the concept of agency from the logic of subversion and resistance, or from a strategic resignification of power that new ideas of agency can be revealed.

However, by inscribing agency in a binary logic without problematising why these women rely on religion in the first place, what kind of instrument religion represents for them and where this obedience is directed, we might overlook the agentive potential religion can have. For example, in the case of pious women, obedience can be directed towards a transcendental power that has nothing to do with men or patriarchy. The agency of religious women is historically and culturally specific and might be detached from the logics of progressive thought. Contextualities are important. As the author affirms, “agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms.” (Mahmood 2011: 15). Instead of Orientalising these women’s motivations, desires and goals, it is important to analyse the discourses and practices through which they affirm their desire. Mahmood explains how, according to Foucault’s understanding, power is a relation of force that not only subordinates, but can also be productive, in the sense that it produces desires, objects, relations and discourse.

Moreover, she adds, as subjects, we do not only produce power-relations, but we are also in a sense shaped by them: “Central to his formulation is what Foucault calls the paradox of subjectivation: the very processes and conditions that secure a subject’s subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent” (Mahmood 2006: 45). In other words, our abilities to affirm our agencies are not based on some kind of pre-constituted freedom but could be a product of power. For this reason, Mahmood believes that agency cannot be viewed as resistance, but rather as the space we have for action provided by the dynamics we navigate. The author relies on Butler to reinforce the idea that even resisting the norm implies a submission to the norm itself:

> To the degree that the stability of social norms is a function of their repeated enactment, agency for Butler is grounded in the essential openness of each iteration and the possibility that it may fail or be reappropriated or re-signified for purposes other than the consolidation of norms. This makes these formations vulnerable because each restatement/reenactment can fail […] In other words, there is no possibility of “undoing” social norms that is independent of the “doing” of norms. (Mahmood 2006: 46)

Therefore, it is possible that religious women express their capacity for agency not only when subverting the norm, but also when they consciously reproduce it. As Orit Avishai states: “To see agency, one does not need to identify empowerment, subversion, or rational strategizing. It suffices to note how members of conservative religions do, observe, perform, religion, wherever that might lead” (Avishai 2008: 429). For this reason, Mahmood dismisses the category of resistance as it inscribes the analytics of power in a progressive politics, thus, preventing us from identifying ways of being and acting that are not encapsulated by the narrative of subversion.

Resistance needs to be de-romanticised as it is inscribed in a progressive politics that does not represent the historical and cultural specificity of religious women’s actions. Moreover, resistance needs to be delinked from freedom. The author proceeds by making a distinction between negative and positive freedom. Negative freedom is that which we experience when no obstacle is restraining our will. Positive freedom is the capacity to act according to our desires and interests, realising our autonomous will. But what if this autonomous will is not linked to the notion of self-realisation, as liberalism suggests? What if it is simply procedural and does not reflect a desire? Detaching the concept of self-realisation from autonomy means creating space to “capture the emotional, embodied, and socially embedded character of people, particularly of women” (Mahmood 2006: 41). As Elizabeth Grosz affirms, the rational and liberal idea of autonomy excludes the body. For this reason, it is important to reaffirm how a desire for freedom is always embodied and culturally and historically located: the practical setting and body in which desire is produced must be taken into account. Mahmood invites us to re-think and expand the concept of agency, or in her words to delink it from the goals of progressive politics. Moving on, in *The Politics of Piety*, Mahmood provides an example of how religious women affirm their role in male-defined spaces by using religious tools. Through religion, women obtain a public role. The author describes the desires of these women and their motivation(s) for participating in Islamic movements. The scholar suggests that these women might be willing participants of what we perceive as submission and docility, for example by problematising the practice of veiling, something which in Western eyes perfectly depicts women's condition of subalternity and sexual segregation. From the Western perspective, veiling as a symbol of submission is seen as a universal rule, no matter the country and socioreligious conditions involved. However, even if the veils worn might look the same, the meaning attached to them differs in every socioreligious context. Assuming that every veiled woman is wearing it for the same reason is reductive and useless. As Bautista explains reelaborating Mahmood:

> Veiling, rather, is a practice that is constitutive of a disposition of shyness. To veil oneself is a conscious act of self-cultivation in which the body is an instrument utilised towards piety. In other words, one's body is both the potential for as well as means through which forms of interiority (such as, but not limited to, shyness) is realised and cultivated. (Bautista 2008: 79)

The veil expresses the value of modesty and in this sense, it reflects the relationship between a norm and the body, making the materiality of the body a central point of an act. As Grosz explains, examining Bergson's view, Bergson did not understand freedom in terms of choice, alternatives available or consumption, but rather in terms of action connected to an embodied subject. Mahmood's work reflects a disappointment with the existing concepts of desire, freedom and agency that do not consider the political context in which they are inscribed or the role of the body. To expand the question of freedom and return to Mahmood's idea that freedom resides in the capacity for action, it is worth mentioning Grosz' conceptualisation of freedom. The author associates the question of freedom to the condition of, or capacity for, action in life, delinking it from a "freedom-from" and revisualizing it in terms of a "freedom to". According to Grosz, a "freedom-from" is not sufficient as it:

> entails that once the subject has had restraints and inhibitions, the negative limitations, to freedom removed, a natural or given autonomy is somehow preserved. If external interference can be minimized, the subject can be (or rather becomes) itself, can be left to itself and as itself, can enact its given

> freedom. Freedom is attained through rights, laws, and rules that minimize negative interference rather than positive actions. (Grosz 2010: 141)

Grosz explains further by proceeding with her analysis of Bergson, who affirms that free acts are those which come exclusively from the subject and express everything about that subject: “they are integral to who or what the subject is” (Grosz 2010: 144). Even in the most difficult and constrained situations there must be a cohesion between the subject’s act and the conditions that made it possible, but only after the act has been completed can we retrospectively establish what caused a certain decision. Freedom as a pre-given condition of a subject implies that the subject is always the same, but:

> Acts are free insofar as they express and resemble the subject, not insofar as the subject is always the same, an essence, an identity but insofar as the subject is transformed by and engaged through its acts, becomes through its acts […]. Bergson’s point is that free acts come from or even through us (it is not clear if it matters where the impetus of the act originates—what matters is how it is retroactively integrated into the subject’s history and continuity). (Grosz 2010: 146)

In this sense, from a non-deterministic perspective, freedom is never a pre-given condition but can only be part of a process or act. Grosz states that according to this understanding, freedom is more the exception than the rule:

> Freedom pertains to the realm of actions, processes, and events that are not contained within, or predictable from, the present; it is that which emerges, surprises, and cannot be entirely anticipated in advance. It is not a state one is in or a quality that one has, but it resides in the activities one undertakes that transform oneself and (a part of) the world. It is not a property or right bestowed on, or removed from, individuals by others but a capacity or potentiality to act both in accordance with one’s past as well as ‘‘out of character,’’ in a manner that surprises. Freedom is thus not primarily a capacity of mind but of body: it is linked to the body’s capacity for movement, and thus its multiple possibilities of action. (Grosz 2010: 152)

As Mahmood also believes, only by analysing the corporeal and bodily practices retrospectively can we derive autonomy from an act. In Grosz’s words, freedom understood as the relationship that the subject might have with the material world, instead of a transcendent inherent quality of the subject, can expand the variety of acts available to us and therefore the expressions of our agency.

Mahmood analyses the role of embodied behavior in the formation of the subject, stating that the experience of Muslim women, and in particular of the women of the pious movement she studies, is highly influenced by Islamic ethical practice. The author gives an example based on her experience during the observation of the pious movement. The desire of these Muslim women to be pious was severely obstructed by secular ethos, for example when it came to engaging in interactions with male coworkers, having to move in spaces occupied by men or in the case of overhearing impious conversation. Furthermore, they often had to deal with resistance that came from family members that opposed their deep form of devotion. This devotion, often expressed through modesty and shyness, was not natural to them, they had to learn it, they made themselves shy and humble even if they had to create it in order to fulfill the potential that religious conduct entails. The relationship between these women and the norm exemplifies the relationship between a performative behavior and the inward disposition. In the case of the veil, instead of an innate will causing bodily behavior, it is action that shapes desire. In this sense, in the words of Mahmood: "action does not issue forth from natural feelings but creates them. Furthermore, it is through repeated bodily acts that one trains one's memory, desire, and intellect to behave according to established standards of conduct" (Mahmood 2006: 53). But the act of embodying these established standards follows an intention. Performativity becomes one of the factors that influences subject formation. The pious movement uses the body as a medium for fulfilling their ethical potential. Their expression of agency is strictly related to the body. If ethics is grounded in discursive practices, procedures and exercises, as Mahmood affirms in drawing from Foucault, then the relationship between the self and the norm creates the self through bodily practices. All of these practices have as their ultimate goal modifying or transforming the subject in order to fulfill their potentialities.

The intention that pervades all the acts towards and because of God are called *khushu*. Bautista, drawing from Mahmoud's experience, provides an example. A religious woman conferred with one of the pious women to seek guidance about an issue she was facing with the prayer practice. The young woman was having trouble waking up early in the morning to perform the first prayer. The pious woman suggested that her action had to be intentional and that she had to draw from her love for God in order to make this act voluntary instead of a task. The pious woman understood that desire is not innate, but rather that it can be created through obedience. Religious conduct is a medium through which the self is realised. Acts of obedience are a way to achieve a goal that brings them closer to self-realisation: it is a conscious act in the formation of their subjectivity. It is important to bear in mind that Mahmood's commitment to investigating the pious women's movement is not motivated by a blind surrender to cultural relativism, but it is prompted by the aim to debunk "the universalization of a secular conception of desire" (Bautista 2008: 77), proceeding from the fact that Muslim women in the first place might have contributed to strengthening the ideas advanced by progressive politics, creating the genre of "the Muslim woman speaks out" (Bautista 2008: 77). Her scope is to find a more complex answer to complex questions without falling into simplistic binarisms, starting from the following questions:

> why would women participate in Islamist movements when, or so it is supposed, it manifests a grand patriarchal plan to subordinate women and is, in that respect, against their welfare and interests? Why would rational, intelligent and articulate women agree to be associated with interests or habits that would supposedly entrench them into forms of submissive participation? Why would 'modern' enlightened women choose to veil themselves? (Bautista 2008: 76-77)

Mahmood's intention is to provide a more nuanced understanding of agency that goes beyond the liberal feminist concern for their "Muslim sisters", in the words of Bautista. The genre of "the Muslim Woman Speaks out" complicit to the Euro-American discourse is not the only authentic perspective we should explore. The author does so by delving into the different possible forms of desire. Taking as an example the relationship between a pianist challenging themselves to acquire the knowledge needed to become an expert, Mahmood draws a parallel with the embodied agency of pious women who, as Bautista states, craft moral values enacting bodily techniques, and the bodily techniques enacted are the result of a "goal-oriented, reasoned and calculative decision making" (Bautista 2008: 76) and thus, of an agentive behavior.

As Mahmood puts it, pious women's faith is neither a blind nor uncritical prostration. The point is that if we do not expand our idea of agency and freedom, we miss the opportunity to recover these women's voices and to fully understand that what we perceive as a blind act of obedience might be an intentional act of obedience with a rewarding purpose:

> From a methodological perspective, what is most prevalent about Mahmood's work is the assertion that the frameworks of gender equality to which some liberal feminists ascribe are simply inadequate in

> approximating the depth and breadth of the lives of Muslim women. (Bautista 2008: 79)

If freedom is seen only in the terms defined by liberal, political theory, according to which we are free when our actions are the result of our own will and not mediated by culture and tradition, we assume that there is a disjunction between social norms and the realisation of the self. But what if it was not the case for these women? What if, to them, religious conduct represents a way to fulfill their true potentialities? Deconstructing the mainstream idea of freedom helps us to interrupt the silence between feminism and religion and challenge the binary between the secular and the spiritual. As Sara Salem (2013) explains, framing the debate only in terms of choices made by women or forced on women as rights granted or taken away, links the conception of freedom to the controlling power of the other, granting no autonomy. Instead of observing Muslim women through the lens of autonomy in its liberal framework, it makes more sense to value their true intention and start recognizing the role of religion as a cultural toolkit (Rinaldo 2014) for individuals.

However, it is important to mention that the concept of compliant agency described above, as developed and presented by Mahmood and Grosz, has been criticized, as Rinaldo affirms, for giving a definition of agency which is too broad. For this reason, the author carries on by providing different views of the relationship between Muslim women and religion. Rinaldo suggests that religion must be understood with the role of a “cultural toolkit” that serves individuals. Furthermore, the scholar completes her analysis by describing the limit of the “compliant agency” approach. The limit of this approach might be that it does not take into account individuals who are not religious, and for this reason Rinaldo suggests later in the text that the two approaches should be combined together to show how a pious attitude, combined with a critical approach to religion, can create a practice that the author calls “Pious critical agency” that is adopted, for example, by Islamic feminists, as we will be able to explore later:

> From this perspective, religions are powerful cultural schemas that shape how individuals understand themselves, while simultaneously providing a range of resources that allow people to take action in different ways. In this framework, pious and feminist agency are two forms of agency among others. (Rinaldo 2014: 829)

The pious critical agency approach draws from Mahmood’s pious agency concept and shows how piety and feminism can co-operate, without overlooking the matter of being critical towards religion and colonialism. To explore its decolonial aspect, it makes sense to have a look at the concept of the *Muslimwoman* (cooke 2007), the neologism that I am going to problematise in the next paragraph.

3. The “Third-World-*Muslimwoman*”

When it comes to the *Muslimwoman* – a neologism created by miriam cooke (2007) that fuses the two aspects of these women’s identity (gender and religion) into one to show how their sense of self is reduced to the so-called “primary identity”, making them easier to read – we risk falling into the trap of the Third World Woman vision. King explains that according to the researchers Fatme Gocek and Shiva Balaghi, when dealing with the Third World, critical studies use an Orientalist approach that treats societies as static entities. The author reaffirms with the words of Edward Said that “there is a consensus on “Islam” as a kind of scapegoat for everything we do not happen to like about the world’s new political, social, and economic patterns” (Said 1981: xv, as cited in King 2005: 182). My aim in this part of the essay is to draw a parallelism between the neologism forged by miriam cooke and the concept of Third World Woman investigated by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) to show the process Muslim women undergo when they are categorised as submissive by the feminist gaze.

As Sara Salem believes, even categorising certain women as subaltern and others as emancipated is an exercise of othering, as it is taking for granted that religion is always a patriarchal static entity: “the act of defining constitutes an exercise of power that creates certain women’s experiences as patriarchal and others’ as emancipatory” (Salem 2013: 1). This approach discursively colonises “the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of these women” (Mohanty 1988: 334), therefore producing a singular *muslimwoman*.

When speaking of Muslim women by putting them under the same category, as if there was only a single way to be Muslim, the risk is to overshadow the diversity of Muslim women as far as origins and lifestyle are concerned. These women are trapped between these two forces: either they are pitied by neo-Orientalists or they are oppressed by Islamists who want to control their bodies. As Chandra Mohanty explains, imposing the identity of a Third World Woman on religious women is arbitrary and does not examine their voices and experiences. On the contrary, it discursively homogenises and systematises oppression, making the West the implicit referent and Muslim women the Other. The attention is placed on gender which is read as sexually constrained and being Muslim (submissive, oppressed, subaltern, passive target of male domination). Mahmood's vision of religious practice as historically and culturally specific echoes Mohanty's words. Putting these women in the same pre-constituted group, assigning them the same characteristics no matter the context, socioeconomic class and ethnicity and assuming the reason why they engage in certain practices is oppression, structures their experiences in dichotomous terms. Why is this vision of the Muslim woman in binary terms problematic? Because it posits the existence of two different, pre-constituted, ever-lasting categories: on the one hand, in Mohanty's words, the commonality of the Third-World Woman/ *muslimwoman's* struggle, no matter the socioreligious context, class, ethnicity, cultural differences, etc., and, on the other hand, the existence of a general oppressor. This vision opposes the powerful and the powerless and the risk is to overcome the subalternity by re-establishing a system based on the same binary pattern. In Mohanty's words, the ultimate risk is that it: "erases all marginal and resistant modes of experiences" (Mohanty 1988: 352).

> The Muslimwoman is not a description of a reality; it is the ascription of a label that reduces all diversity to a single image. The veil, real or imagined, functions like race, a marker of essential difference that Muslim women today cannot escape. The neologism Muslimwoman draws attention to the emergence of a newly entwined religious and gendered identification that overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical and even philosophical diversity. (cooke 2007: 140)

As Anne Sofie Roald observes, the identity of a Muslim woman has different components that have to do with how one views oneself and not just with how one is perceived by others:

> In certain situations, self-definition might concur with others' perceptions. In minority/majority conflicts, however, others' perceptions tend to be expressed in stereotypical terms. Self-definitions also tend to change according to circumstances. For an Arabic-speaking Muslim woman living in a western European country, her self-awareness of being a Muslim would be pronounced in an environment of non-Muslims, whereas her nationality would be conspicuous in an environment of Muslims from other countries. In her own home, her identity as a woman would define her role, behaviour and work. A Muslim immigrant woman would often

> stress her Muslim identity in her meeting with western researchers. (King 2005: 186)

As Zine (2002) explains, marking these women as victims of Islam’s repression justifies actions under “the trope of liberation”. For this reason, it is important to recover their own experiences and accounts to decolonize feminist critique and oppose the imperialist view. Zine examines contemporary feminist writing to discover the paradigms imposed on Muslim women such as the “oppressed Muslim woman” and “rescued Muslim maiden”, or perhaps “Muslim maiden in need of rescue” (Zine 2002: 16). Zine does so because she believes it is important to know the process through which these paradigms are created in order to act against essentialisation, as Islamic feminists try to do by engaging in decolonial practice.

4. Islamic Feminism as a decolonial practice

The decolonial practice starts by deconstructing the epitome of the *Muslimwoman*, putting into question its very accuracy, as Asma Lamrabet does in *Women and Men in the Qur’an*:

> Here, the question that begs an answer is, which Muslim woman are we talking about? The Asian or the African? The North African or the Middle Easterner? The Muslim women of the Gulf or those from Balkan states? Western Europeans or North Americans? Residents of Dubai or those living in the Egyptian countryside? The Bengali Muslim woman who lives like a slave in the palaces of Riyadh, or the young Turkish woman living in the suburbs of Istanbul? (Lamrabet 2018: 9)

Asma Lamrabet believes Muslim women’s trauma when it comes to colonialism was enhanced by the feminist “white man’s burden” approach who put them all under the same category and according to which they needed salvation. She strongly believes that one of the main reasons Muslim women have been excluded from feminism is due to the effects of colonisation. The western liberation project of Muslim women was for a long time perceived as a colonialist project. But when we define these women as passive, we lose the chance to discover all the ways they express their agency, for example by exercising power over knowledge production through the interpretation of the sacred Qur’an. Islamic feminists engage in the practice of hermeneutics and hexegesis to challenge male Islamic ideas, re-writing what Muslim femininity is, and they do so by engaging in a cosmopolitan, transnational and intersectional feminist practice:

> Muslim woman cosmopolitanism works across borders to weave a hybrid cultural system that disturbs the hegemony and desired homogeneity of both neo-Orientalism and religious extremism. To counter this instability, neo-Orientalists and Islamic extremists must constantly resort to a homogenising rhetoric that reinforces and reproduces their own dominant paradigm and asserts it to be natural, unlike the unnatural hybridity of new Muslimwoman identities and desires. (cooke et al. 2008: 98)

An example of the empowering character of Islamic feminism is Asma Lamrabet's interpretation of the creation of humanity that redefines gender roles. In *The Creation of Humanity,* Lamrabet presents the Qur'an's portrait of the creation of humanity. Through her interpretation, the author challenges the predominant idea of Eve as a symbol of all sins who was created from Adam. In Lamrabet's understanding of The Creation, women and men were created from the same essence through different stages: "O mankind! Reverence your Lord, Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate, and from the two has spread abroad a multitude of men and women" (Lamrabet 2018: 36).

The author explains that regardless of religious tradition, the belief that Eve, the mother of all sins, was created from Adam's rib remains ingrained in our collective consciousness. The feminist anti-patriarchal reading of the Qur'anic text, on the other hand, attests to spiritual equality, as symbolized by the creation tale of women and men from the same essence, the "original single soul", as stressed in the above verse. There is no evidence of culpability attributed to Eve for her banishment from Paradise. Eve is not perceived as a source of evil, nor as a sinner. It is the interpretation of most misogynist exegeses that assign upon her the role of temptress. Lamrabet proceeds by saying that, according to the Qur'an, the two beings are both equally responsible for their disobedience. Their act is pardoned by the Creator as an act that signifies their first exercise of agency and choice. God teaches them to be equally free and responsible. This is a very eloquent example of Islamic feminists' capacity to interpret the religious sacred text and build their own instruments to take control of their own narrative and seek emancipation if they believe they should, without needing any patronising interference from the West. For this reason they fight for equal access to the interpretation of the Qur'an and I consider this fight a decolonial practice, inasmuch as instead of letting the “colonizer” dictate what their liberation should look like, they build and rely on their own tool to provide multiple and self-conscious critiques as they deal with several axes of discrimination at once:

> Within the Eurocentric paradigm, liberation for Muslim women is measured by the degree to which their dress codes conform to standards acceptable in the West. This is not to deny the fact that the policing of women’s dress by repressive regimes is unjustifiably oppressive. However, to accept conformity to a set of cultural codes determined by the West means that Muslim women will be subjected to yet another hegemonic worldview and will continue to be denied the opportunity to define for themselves what liberation an empowerment mean and whether or not this includes the veil. (Zine 2002: 15).

5. Conclusions

Kimberley Crenshaw (1990) uses the term intersectionality as a way to designate the multiple layers of discriminations women suffer because of their multifaceted identity that the category of gender alone is unable to encompass. If religious identity is not considered in the fight for equality, can the feminist practice really be considered intersectional? If religious identity is not acknowledged as a point of departure for empowering women, as a cultural toolkit, how many women’s experiences are we leaving behind? It is important to center their experiences, their actual lived realities and explore new facets of feminism. An intersectional practice is a type of practice that addresses the way multiple positionalities work. Reconceptualising religion as a positionality is one of the solutions that could possibly grant this approach. Creenshaw states that at times categories might prove empowering. Only through a context-specific analysis can we generate new transnational practices and strategies. An intersectional approach listens to the voices of women in order to unravel their narratives and experiences. The focus is on their voices and not on our preconceived assumptions, and only through intersectional research can their voices emerge. As Allison Weir believes, it is important to engage in a politics of listening:

> If the point of knowledge is to appreciate our place in the universe and to guide our actions, to guide us in our interactions with each other and with the world, then this kind of knowledge has served very well. […] The practices of knowledge oriented toward stories rather than truth claims, toward deep listening and being with rather than distanced observation,

> testing, and skeptical questioning, are rooted in Indigenous spirituality. (McLaren 2017: 393)

Even if the author is referring to Indigenous experience, which shares the same struggle of being doubted and colonised as Muslim women do, the point that I intend to make is that instead of imposing our view of pious Muslim women on them, we should be open to listening to their stories and drop the Western feminist gaze in order to engage in a politics of listening. The relationship these women have with the Divine tells a story, a story of piety, of identity, a story of love. As Roald (2001 as cited in King) explains, through religion many women have the possibility to express the intense emotions related to the Divine. Many women, during prayer or when they connect with God, experience emotions similar to those one might encounter in a romantic relationship. To conclude, identifying the faith and lifestyle of religious and in this case of Muslim women as a strategy or as a condition of subalternity is reductive and prevents us from really uncovering their voices, their agency, their critical ability, the narrative of love, of piety and the stories that shaped their identity:

> If we understand the world's religious traditions as narratives, and if we are willing to use language that expresses our own experiential and spiritual positioning within one or several of those narratives – however confusing or ambivalent that might be – we become part of a dialogue in which the language of prayer, spirituality and longing for God are not forbidden by the diktat of secularism. (King 2005: 74)

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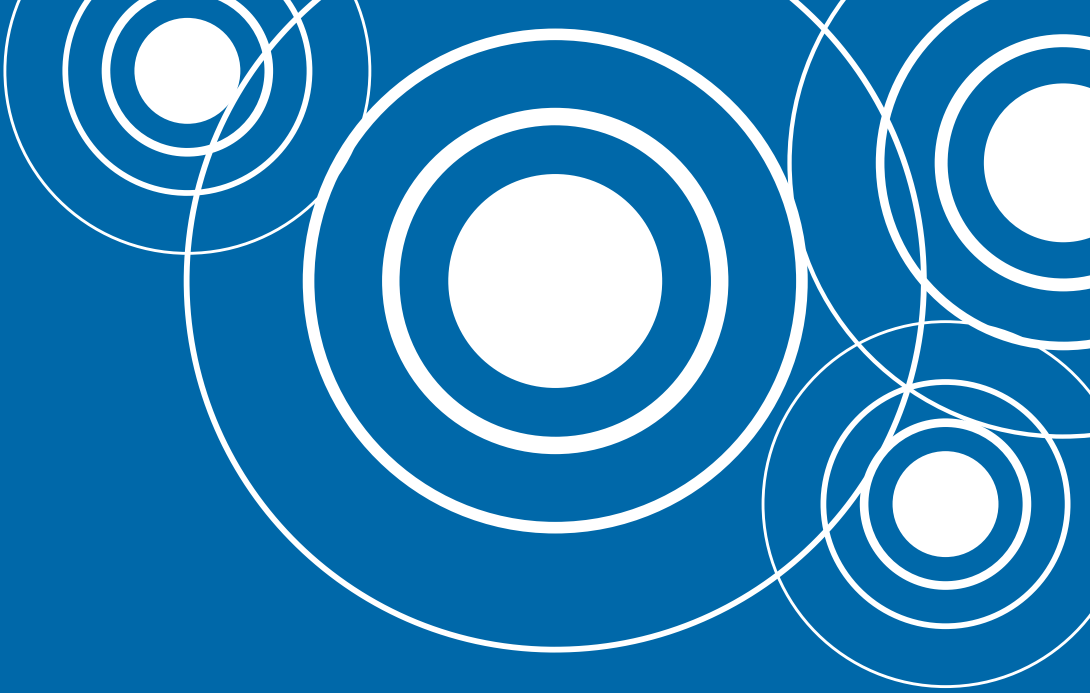

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