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Gender and religions. Freedom, identity and limits

Orsetta Giolo
University of Ferrara

Laura Scudieri
University of Genoa

Editorial[1]

1. Feminist theology, queer theology and reflections on gender

For some time now a gender studies perspective investigating the processes through which identity is constructed and represented has permeated various fields of knowledge (from sociology to architecture, law to philosophy, medicine to economics). However, it still appears to play only a marginal and controversial role in religious studies, understood in its most diverse articulations and manifestations.

[1] This article is the product of a close collaboration between the authors. However, final editing on the first section was carried out by Laura Scudieri and on the second section by Orsetta Giolo. The first section aims to introduce the elements of the debate, while the second focuses on the complex relationship between critical theories and theologies.

To take up the question that constitutes the subtitle to the rich collection of essays *Non contristate lo Spirito* (Perroni 2007), there is no doubt that something has changed and is continuing to change: this shift is evidenced, for example, by the fact that powerful metaphors arising from the strategy of "queering" aimed at uncovering symbols of queerness (fluid gender models) in the Christian tradition now circulate freely, whereas at one time their use in theological discourse would certainly have been forbidden (Althaus-Reid 2014).

It is equally clear, however, that the relationship between gender and religious phenomena remains complex and dotted with problematic knots that often translate into hostile discourses and practices. Suffice it to recall the heated controversies that have long been triggered by any identity-based claims-making that seek to combine emancipatory aspirations and religious dictates (Scudieri 2013) – often by constructing the former on the basis of the latter, as is the case in most forms of Islamic feminism – or the harsh ideological clashes developing around so-called "gender theory" in Europe, especially Italy and France. Moreover, it is highly plausible that this anti-gender (studies) crusade (see numbers 6 and 7, edited respectively by Garbagnoli and Selmi, as well as those contained in this issue edited by Bernini and the article by Sroczynski, also in this issue) emerged in response to the fact that, over a century after the publication of the *Woman's Bible* text (Stanton 1885) that was supposed to have charted a fruitful path for feminists, feminist struggles have finally succeeded in putting "the problem that has no name" on the ecumenical agenda; indeed, they have managed to bring attention to bear on the socio-cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity based on biological differences between the sexes that have so significantly shaped the formation of individual identity (Coordinamento Teologhe Italiane 2011; Rigato 2011; Perroni 1997).

Theology has only fairly recently begun to address "gender issues": for Christianity, the document on interpretation compiled by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1993 is considered decisive, although Valerie Saiving Goldstein's article from thirty years earlier (1960) titled *The Human Situation. A Feminine View* is recognized as a fundamental point of reference.

Nonetheless, male and female scholars have been working for quite some time (in some cases, for centuries) in various religious contexts in an effort to deconstruct and discredit what they consider to be unfounded sexist interpretations of sacred texts and precepts, responding theoretically to points of critique raised by secular perspectives. Indeed, these critical secular approaches generally argue that religion has functioned and continues to function in the service of a heterosexist, hierarchical and patriarchal regime built on male domination. They point out that many religious denominations continue to embrace structures and rules that, at least organizationally speaking, still have a long way to go in terms of breaking open the "cages of gender" as feminists have demanded, at least insofar as these structures and rules are shaped by an indisputably and deeply stereotyped conceptualization of persons and their roles. As a number of studies have found, women are actually more religious than men, but by and large they are excluded from the hierarchies of power of the world's various religious communities.

With this in mind, it should be noted that most of the battles waged by religious feminist movements have been focused on allowing women to hold religious offices to which they have historically been denied access, such as the position of priests and the Pope in Christianity, Rabbis in Judaism and Imams in Islam (to name only the three main monotheistic religions). The most well-known of these are the Islamic feminists Amina Wadud, an African-American theologian, and Raheel Raza, a Canadian journalist of Pakistani origins, both of whom have been receiving death threats for years from extremist groups who object to their conducting mixed-sex Friday prayer services in New York (Wadud), Toronto and Oxford (Raza). Martha C. Nussbaum's finding (2013) that more than half of today's Rabbis are female represents an important sign of change in this direction, along with the fact that more and more Muslim women are carrying out the role of Imam.

Generally speaking, the doctrines developed by feminist liberation theologies (be they Protestant, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu or Buddhist), "post-liberal" theologies (such as those based on Wittgenstein's writings) and gay, lesbian and queer theologies (de Lauretis 1990; Stuart 2002; Goss 2002; Althaus-Reid 2014) are engaged in interesting and *originalist* interpretations. These hermeneutics tend to move along the

boundaries of different disciplines and forms of knowledge and employ an intersectional approach in order to push for a radical reinterpretation of the original religious messages which, they argue, have been distorted over the centuries. On one hand, the intersectional approach is capable of highlighting the multifaceted forms of discrimination affecting individuals who occupy multiple – and often interconnected and interacting – horizons of subordination; on the other hand, as the Islamic feminist theorist Miriam Cooke would say, intersectionality «celebrates multiple belongings» (59).

Liberation theologies are critical theologies that seek to provide innovative theoretical models and practical strategies beginning from the idea that religion represents a valuable resource for human development in all its senses. According to this perspective, critical theologies – which are sensitive to gender issues – chart pathways that are in keeping with the widely-known capability approach (developed by the aforementioned Nussbaum) in that they aim to enlarge and propagate human capability as a means of ensuring that individuals reach their full expressive potential. As the feminist theologian Forcades argues, the specific aspect that must flourish is our human capacity for love:

> The task of feminist theology today is to open ways so that we can all together build societies that, while relying and fostering the equality in dignity, in intelligence and in freedom of women and men, rely and foster as well the equality in their loving capacity (Forcades 2008, 113).

The unquestionably valuable intent of these doctrines is to break free of the conventional impasses and, at long last, grant visibility to subjectivities, freeing them from entrenched socio-cultural constructs while at the same time liberating even God from these constructs in a way that facilitates the coming out of God so long awaited by queer theologians.

While feminist struggles – which have come to also include well-respected male supporters offering evocative reflections on masculinity – revolve around the category of gender and a critique of patriarchy as the organizational structure of all social

relations, gay and lesbian critical approaches are focused on sexual orientation and critiques of homo/transphobia while queer ones champion "indecent theologies of resistance" that seek to dismantle the foundations of a theology that is experienced as totalitarian, beginning from a move these scholars understand as developing an awareness of the sexualization of bodies, including those of God and the Trinity (Althaus-Reid 2000).

The theologian Forcades stresses that an interrogation of the body is central even within critical Catholic theology, reminding us that that «God became body in that spirit cannot conceive of himself as if it were non-corporeal but rather as embodied, only conceivable within the limits of a relational individual identity capable of performing free acts of love» (Forcades 2012, author's translation from the original Spanish, see also the translated text republished in this issue).

When viewed through the lenses of queer theology, the Trinity embodies the divine polyamorous ideal, suggesting «"dialogical" God whose identity in some way depends on people's "loving relationships"», relationships that cannot be limited to mere procreative sexuality, as a studies by gay and lesbian theologists have clearly demonstrated (Althaus-Reid 2014, 105, 120; Stuart 2003).

The queer God is a nomadic, omnisexual and libertine God in a state of perpetual transformation and opposed to stasis, decency and docility, qualities which are considered inimical to freedom by virtue of their being the product of devious *dispositif* of domestication and normalization according to the Foucauldian perspective adopted by many authors.

As Forcades argues, «Christianity is instead a practice, a practice of justice and liberation». She further writes:

> Christian thought says that we were created in the image of God and we are called on to enact our potential freedom through acts of love for which we are always responsible. Christian feminism acts in this sense as a repellent against any attempt to construct a feminism that is not based on an anthropology of freedom (Forcades 2012).

As a result, the queer God is first and foremost a hospitable God who tends to intermingle with otherness, a quality which is conceived of as his essential character (see Gugliermetto's *Prefazione* in Althaus-Reid 2014). It is on the basis of this foundation that we can argue that the queer God is «the stranger at the door» (Althaus-Reid 2014, especially 129, 263) who, as the Waldensian theologian Tomassone has stressed, poses:

> a powerful question to theology, urging it to depart from the territories that it had built to grant itself a place and a certain power, venturing instead into dark alleys and neighborhood bars and bringing with it God, a God as nomadic and "strange" as the real lives of all people, that is, queer (Afterword by Tomassone in Althaus-Reid 2014, 298).

In these dark alleys and neighborhood bars – «Queer hiding places» – theology will discover that «the Queer God*,* calling us towards a life of Queer holiness*,* has been coming out for a long time in bisexual towns of Latin America, in the *Soq'a* theology of sexual affairs and also among the social excluded living in the slums of Buenos Aires» (Althaus-Reid 2003, 171).

This "revelation" shows that, like some critical feminist theologies, queer theologies first emerge as decolonial theologies whose initial demand is decolonization. The critical target of decolonial perspectives can be summed up in what the Argentine-Brazilian anthropologist Segato calls «high-intensity or high impact modern colonial patriarchy» grafted onto a «low-intensity or low-impact patriarchy». As Segato argues, without colonial-capitalist interference this latter form would be much less harmful and could be dismantled in short order thanks to the practices of the many indigenous women and men engaged in trajectories of "internal" critique aimed at triggering a process of emancipation designed to gradually engage the entire communities of belonging, giving voice to "sexual minorities" (Segato 2015).

Wherever such decolonization is no longer possible, queer theologies propose to instead occupy, denude and finally "re-territorialize" spaces and bodies (again, including the body of God) in which heteronormativity prevails:

> Queer theologies are tactical theologies, using tactical queerness to cruise places occupied by normative straightness. [...] Queer theology, then, a first person theology, diasporic, self-disclosing, autobiographical, and responsible for its own words (Althaus-Reid 2004, 8).

Ultimately, it is precisely heteronormativity conceived of as a rigidly binary «power structure» (Warner 1991; Abbatecola and Stagi 2015) that constitutes the common target of all liberation theologies. Beyond their many specificities, then, they all seem to share a basic premise: in order to carry out a genuine transformation and develop a viable way of thinking and living alternative to the status quo, we must *position ourselves* at the *borders* and listen to oppressed, abject, depauperized, desexualized, disabled, "feminized" and marginalized bodies:

> If we climb out of our burrows and seriously address the issue of gender, if we approach it beginning from those who most clearly reveal the recital of gender all of us, male and female, are subjected to, we can understand that the path to reconciliation sets out from taking another look at the plurality of images created in the image and likeness of a god who refuses to be silenced, defined or trapped in a label or categorization, a god who, in order to present himself, takes on a name that can only be translated in indicatory signs (Stretti 2013, 279).

In conclusion, I would argue that perhaps it is only by frequenting the margins and «putting the body in its historicity and singularity back at the center» (Maggi, 2013, 333) – as today's heated bioethical debate also demands – that we can achieve «different and better understandings of God» (Althaus-Reid 2003, 130). Perhaps it is only then that "churches" can become authentic spaces of resiliency and liberation (Naso 2013, 435).

2. Theologies and critical theories: relationships, clashes and future prospects

It therefore seems that relations among feminist claims, gender studies perspectives, queer insights and theological reflection remain highly complex and often steeped in

conflict. While on one side the literature is by now extensive and well-established, accompanied by an active discussion about the intertwining of different orientations, on the other side, as is well known, there are also various oppositional movements and ideological currents which continue to insist on the most conservative interpretations of the sacred texts and religious traditions, reiterating in various ways that the subjects claiming new spaces, visibility and freedom in the religious sphere deserve only condemnation. It is clear that even today crusades against proposals to reform religious and bureaucratic-clerical orthodoxy most typically target women, homosexuals and transgender people.

By taking on a gender studies perspective, *critical* theologies thus take a stand against the most conservative and traditionalist configuration in just the same way that critical theories of law and politics position themselves in opposition to classical philosophical-legal thought and political philosophy.

In fact, as Forcades (2015, 15) so effectively notes, critical theologies function in the same way as "secular" critical theories to demystify the neutrality of the institutions and interpretations that have been produced over the centuries in order to reveal their sexist (as well as racist and classist) foundations. They push for a recognition of the subjectivities that have been excluded from (public and private) spaces of faith and propose innovative pathways for redefining relations and the collective imaginary as well as social, institutional and community structures.

It goes without saying that, like "secular" critical theories, critical theologies are often considered interesting and cutting-edge in the same way and for the same reasons; even more often, however, they are seen as marginal, eccentric and non-essential – in terms of what they contribute – to the advancement of knowledge and furthering our understanding or to the task of more effectively identifying the substance of the principles of dignity and justice. They are thus considered instances of "surplus" or "fringe" thinking and, as such, they very rarely manage to achieve full recognition in either religious or secular academia or in official texts.

And yet these critical theologies and theories do boast considerable importance in terms of practical repercussions.

For example, by now we can assert that it is precisely thanks to "secular" critical theories – that is, thanks to analyses and struggles for the rights of women, homosexuals and people with disabilities, against racial segregation and so on – that fundamental fights have been extended to all people. In the same way we can unquestio-

nably recognize the impact that critical theologies are beginning to display in the religious sphere, both theoretically and institutionally.

To understand the real scope of this positive and fruitful impact, however, we must distinguish among multiple levels of these theologies.

The first level comprises precisely these open reflections presented by female theologians and scholars (and, at times, their male colleagues) that fuel an increasingly rich, multi-faceted, radical and at times "uninhibited" debate, as clearly outlined in the previous section. In this setting, the complicated relationship between gender studies and religious perspectives seems not only solvable, as it can be managed without problems, but even "already solved": the freedom with which feminist and queer theories are cited and discussed actually gives the impression that actors in the religious sphere no longer have any hesitation or difficulty in engaging these kinds of issues and perspectives.

The second level specifically concerns the practical implications of these discussions and demands. In this case, the central issue would appear to be an exploration of the significant changes critical theologies are producing within different religions, and whether or not these transformations affect *all* religions. To answer this question, we obviously need to make some further distinctions.

First, it is important to clarify that, beyond formal religious institutions or regardless of the official positions taken by the governing bodies of the various religious denominations, the communities once known as "grass-roots" religious communities, that is, communities of worshippers, often experience and enact various innovative ways of affirming subjectivities that have so far been excluded from the highest levels of the clerical and bureaucratic orders. For instance, there are a number of highly divergent attempts to valorize the presence of women in various religious contexts, sometimes going so far as to self-affirm excluded subjectivities as entitled to the same opportunities and rights/obligations in the religious sphere. The previously mentioned and very well-known cases of Amina Wadud and Raheel Raza would seem to fall under this latter category, along with that of Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed, who was born in Algeria in 1978 and now lives in France. Zahed founded the association *Homosexuels musulmans de France* and the first "inclusive mosque": as he states, «"This project gives hope back to many believers in my community. Common prayer, practised in an egalitarian setting and without any form of gender-based discrimination, is one of the pillars supporting the proposed reforms of our progressive representation of Islam"» (Zahed 2012).

The second point of clarification instead focuses on the concrete, significant changes that have occurred in recent years precisely in terms of opportunities for women and homosexual people to play the roles traditionally restricted to (actually or presumably) heterosexual men. The reforms implemented in the Protestant faiths that have led to the appointment of heterosexual or lesbian woman as well as gay men to the post of Pastor are certainly very significant and have undoubtedly signaled a radical change of perspective in the official religious conception of human relationships, sexuality and corporeality as well as society as a whole. It therefore appears that, in these cases, the ideas put forward by critical theologies over the years have come to enjoy wide acceptance and agreement, making a profound impact and leading to the development of new positions.

As far as the contemporary Catholic Church is concerned, however, it is widely agreed that these kinds of transformations are still a long way off, and in fact this represents a further point of distinction. Indeed, apart from the intellectual ferment of Catholic theologians, the Catholic Church does not appear to have any desire to even minimally erode the conservative structure that continues to characterize its religious doctrine and the hierarchical, male composition of its clergy. As a matter of fact, in this case it appears that the two levels identified above – the level of free thought and that of concrete effects on official doctrinal and institutional organization – remain quite distinct, maintaining an ongoing state of non-communication. Certainly, a great deal of this close-mindedness in relation to both female priests and understanding what a gender studies perspective actually entails seems to stem from the composition of the Church's governing bodies, which are still all-male, as well as the conservative ideological orientation that continues to prevail.

However, a part of the responsibility for this close-mindedness would seem to lie elsewhere.

In fact, compared to the experiences of other Christian faiths, there seems to be a *vulnus* characterizing a component of Catholic critical theology. Specifically, the relationship between these critical theologies and "secular" critical theories seems to be characterized by an inability to achieve dialogue. Catholic circles continue to view secular feminist movements, along with LGBT movements, as a "distant" phenomenon in that such movements have always been treated with a certain distrust if not open hostility. Especially in the Italian context, in fact, the rift that has long characterized the relationship between Catholic women's movements and secular feminist and leftist women's movements still appears to be quite wide. It is true that this

rift has been bridged only in rare moments in the past, and its perpetuation has certainly not helped to fully affirm women's subjectivity. Today, however, it is quite difficult to fathom the reason for this ongoing mutual distrust between critical theologies and "secular" critical theories, given that the larger cultural, ideological and political landscape has undergone radical shifts and is no longer permeated by the ideological rivalry that once existed. Indeed, their mutual opposition would seem to be anachronistic, especially when it is re-presented as the taking of rigid positions around certain theses (with regard to notions of family or in the field of bioethics, for instance) and fails to consider new angles: what are the issues, choices, objectives and claims in relation to which these two critical approaches *really* still disagree to such an extent? Would it not be possible (and desirable) to instead launch a lucid discussion that might lead these two camps to find common ground in terms of topics and perspectives and, in so doing, exert more impact in the various institutional and doctrinal contexts?

Furthermore, an open and constructive dialogue between critical theologies and theories might very likely help to bridge the gap that sometimes exists in the religious sphere between the plane of reflection or consideration and that of activism and militancy. It is widely recognized that the specificity of critical theories lies in their link with lived experience, in the inescapable connection between theory and practice, between analysis and political claims-making. Just like "secular" critical theories, critical theologies must necessarily translate into practical actions or else they fail to exist. If they do not produce significant results, therefore, they sin by omission: their decisive turning point almost certainly takes the form of an increased focus on militancy and activism.

This special issue has been conceptualized and put together precisely with the main aim of comparing different worlds and different perspectives on the relationship between gender studies and the world's various religions. While it is widely recognized that religion has greatly influenced and still influences our conceptions of gender, in many instances these issues are addressed without necessarily establishing a direct dialogue with religious believers or without fully considering the "critical" voices speaking out from within religious circles. As previously noted, this dialogue of the deaf makes it particularly difficult to achieve mutual understanding and, above all, seems to give rise to hostility and conflict.

The intention of this special issue, therefore, is to try to swim against the current of common practice in this field: on one hand, by opening up the academic debate to

critical-theological reflections on gender and, on the other hand, by exploring critical theology's interest in "secular" critical theories.

To this end, the special issue presents several contributions which, in various ways and from different disciplinary perspectives, explore in more depth certain aspects and critical issues that characterize this complex relationship between gender and religions.

As the diversity of the topics addressed here demonstrates, this complexity stems from the considerable range of implications that religious interpretations of the institution of gender have historically given rise to or contributed to building and reinforcing, regardless of the specific cultural (as well as political, economic and ideological) context.

In fact, readers will notice that the essays collected here refer to highly diverse countries, communities, historical periods and problems; at the same time, however, it is clear that the traditionally conservative religious approach to gender roles as well as the patriarchal and heterosexual structure of society cuts across the different cases. It is equally clear that the effort of critical theologies to deconstruct these structures and interpretations likewise represents a constant in all the various contexts.

In her essay, Serena Vantin seeks to bring into dialogue a number of significant contributions from feminist thought regarding the role of religion, analyzing the connecting links that can be found in the work and theses of one of feminism's founding mothers, Mary Wollstonecraft, as well as those of the lesser known Sarah Moore Grimké (1792-1873), a Quaker who was among the first to raise women's consciousness in America beginning precisely from her need to combine religious reflection aimed at moral renewal with support for the rights of women and slaves.

In another article, Maria Giulia Bernardini focuses instead on the relationship between critical theologies and "secular" critical theories, analyzing Christian disability theology as an approach aimed at bringing attention to bear on a traditionally excluded subjectivity, that of people with disabilities, and as a field of scholarship that clearly benefits from the theoretical contributions of 'Disability Studies'.

The following essay by Erika Bernacchi provides an overview of new forms of spirituality inspired by feminist-oriented claims. In particular, she focuses on female scholars and women's groups that have gone so far as to recover or reinterpret forms of spirituality centered on female deity cults, giving rise to what Starhawk (1979) termed the "Goddess movement".

The essay by Marcin Sroczynski addresses a highly topical issue, namely the way that Catholic circles actively condemn the 'ideology' of gender studies. In this analysis, focused on the specific case of the Polish Catholic Church, the author shows how the two sides often engage in mutual stigmatization even while resorting to the same arguments.

Silvia Rodeschini provides a critical interpretation of Pope Bergoglio's encyclical *Laudato si'*: according to the author, this text once again weaves an indissoluble connection between the environment and heterosexuality in order to emphasize that sexual and gender binaries are based on a natural moral law.

In his essay, Federico D'Agostino presents several hypotheses regarding the relationship between Jewish identity and male homosexual identity on the basis of an analysis of the way they were both simultaneously "created" in late European modernity.

In the article by Heidemarie Winkel, the attention shifts to other geographical areas, namely the Middle East: the author does not focus her inquiry on Islam as you might expect; rather, she explores the more innovative issue of women's roles within Arab and Christian churches.

Finally, the essays by Giorgia Baldi, Emanuela Buscemi and Renata Pepicelli focus in different ways on activism and the condition of women in Muslim settings. Baldi focuses on the use of the *hijab* as an expression of freedom or the oppression of women in light of the interpretations of the principle of freedom formulated by the European Court of Human Rights' jurisprudence. Buscemi instead investigates the activism of women in Kuwait, a phenomenon that has certainly received very little academic attention. And, lastly, Renata Pepicelli shares the results of her exploration of identity construction among young women of Egyptian origins who were born in and/or live in Rome. She finds that these women's identities are trifold, arising from their relationships with the Egyptian community, their attachment to Italy and their sense of belonging to the *umma* or community of believers.

Finally, the appendix contains essays by two theologians: the first is by the Catholic theologian Teresa Forcades, known throughout the world for her open-minded positions and her work in the field of feminist theology; the second is an essay in which the Waldensian theologian and pastor Letizia Tomassone briefly presents the debate on gender that is currently taking place inside Protestant churches.

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