

Gender Based Anxiety in Religion

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Introduction

When we speak about forming a European Cultural Identity we need to consider that identity is very complex and varies from person to person. Scientific research speaks about “intersectionality”, i.e., a complex relationship and mutual interaction between social differences. We can notice interactions between the inequality-generating categories of gender, class and race, sexuality, age, (dis)ability, religion and nationality. Here I will concentrate on “gender identity” and “religious identity” which for various reasons are often ignored.

The relationship between the two categories “gender” and “religion” is by no means unambiguous. Both are categories in which identities are constructed and whose deconstruction or questioning can provoke great fears. As social categories, religion and gender are of central importance in processes of social exclusion and the “construction of the other”, also referred to as “Othering”. One's own is taken for granted, positive and superior, while the alleged other is categorized as not belonging and deviant, and is devalued.

Anne Hege Grung from the University of Oslo points out,

What is disturbing is the dynamics created when ‘women’ and ‘religion’ are claimed to be identity markers in a way that fuel fundamentalist, non-democratic, non-feminist movements, and ‘women’ and ‘religion’ are expelled from scholarly analysis and reflection and the public sphere. (2017, 165).

Religion, Women, Power Structures, and Structural and Cultural Violence

From 2016 to 2019, together with a team of young scholars, I undertook a research on gender and interreligious dialogue. This research started around the time when we had our CoE side event “Are Religions a Place of Emancipation for Women? Progress and Setbacks”, organized by Gender Equality Expert Dr. Anne Nègre (2016, 21 June).

Essentialist view of binary gender vs. a non-binary definition of gender in all religions

During that time I was quite surprised to learn about the different religious notions and interpretations of gender identity. At least three of the speakers clearly represented a very essentialist view of binary gender, taking man and woman as inherently and irreducibly different. They stated that women are of equal value (not inferior), but still cannot take the same

roles as men, because of them being 'different'. It was argued that because of being women they are not able or qualified to take on certain religious leadership positions.

Our interreligious research team consisted of four feminist theologians (two women and two men) from four different religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism). In the process of research it turned out that in all four religions (as well as in other world religions) there are strands of essentializing gender.¹ This means, it is not a question of religion, but a question of with whom the prerogative of the final interpretation remains. In all the religions at stake you can find sources deconstructing gender and supporting a non-binary definition of gender. Gender is not a fixed stable entity but fluid. Gender is not only socially but also theologically constructed.

Negative attitudes toward women and the feminine can be found in all religions

At the same time, in all religions, we can find a certain negative attitude toward women and the feminine. The Latvian Lutheran church decided in June 2016 to ban women's further access to the same offices as men. In the Catholic Church women cannot lead a parish and cannot become priests. The same goes for the Orthodox Church. In the ultra-orthodox traditions of Judaism women cannot become rabbis. And in two of the three mainstream traditions of Buddhism they cannot become fully ordained nuns, comparable to priests, and different from monks in Sri Lanka & Thailand, if ordained, the state refuses to enter their monastic name into their legal papers which leads to social disadvantage.

In many religions, for fear of the impurity of women or allegedly protecting them from men, we find **gender segregation**. In Israel, although forbidden by law since 2011, it still happens that women have to sit at the back of the bus or don't get transport at all, because they are considered impure. In many religious spaces women sit either on a different side, in the back behind men, or not visible on the gallery or in an extra room.

In public universities in Europe, since 1998, for example, Catholic theologians no longer receive professorships when they make ambiguous statements regarding women's ordination. They must publish against the ordination of women in order to qualify for a chair. In Germany, in 2017, women still hold significantly fewer chairs than men: in the Evangelic Lutheran

¹ Gender essentialism: "The belief that males and females are born with distinctively different natures, determined biologically rather than culturally. This involves an equation of gender and sex." Retrieved from: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095846595> (28.10.2019).

Theology they hold 106 out of a total of 421 chairs (25%), and in the Roman Catholic Theology 73 out of a total of 353 chairs (21%).

Reasons for negative attitudes toward women in religions

Negative attitudes toward women in religion are partly based on maintaining power, and partly on ascetic misogyny. When ascetic purity or celibacy is presented as the spiritual ideal, women are often seen as threat. And when they demand equality, they are considered splittists, or even seen as agents or precursors of distraction and ruin of the whole tradition. On the other hand, often they are portrayed as weaker human beings who need male protection which also keeps them away from equal positions.

Impact of negative attitudes toward women in religions

In many religions women have no equal access to (a) sacred knowledge, (b) participation in practices and rituals maintaining the future of their religious tradition (through forum participation, decision-making, problem-solving etc.), and (c) the existence of self-dependent monastic institutions. Thus they are partly excluded from equal participation and decision making. That means they are excluded from the core of the religion itself.

Possibilities to act against discrimination of women in the field of religion

From the political side, the state should promote the actual implementation of equal rights for women and men and take steps to eliminate disadvantages that now exist. The religious sphere should not be an exception when it comes gender equality. The principle of equality must take precedence over religious freedom.

The laws that need to be implemented are:

- United Nations Covenant (UN Pact II), 1966, Article 3²
- European Convention of Human Rights, 1950, Article 14³

² International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966, entry into force 3 January 1976, in accordance with article 27: Article 3: “The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to ensure the **equal right of men and women** to the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights set forth in the present Covenant.” Retrieved from:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx> (28.10.2019)

³ European Convention on Human Rights. Article 14: Prohibition of discrimination. The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Convention shall be secured **without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status.** Retrieved from:

But change cannot only come from the secular, legal side, but also has to come from the religious side. Textual evidence must come from the direct and original source: the authoritative religious texts themselves. Many men and women, with deeply engrained conservative patterns of behavior will resist change and attempt to justify their beliefs and actions referring to the authoritative texts. Thus, it will be necessary to appeal to the repository of the very texts themselves, and to dismantle erroneous views, by means of hermeneutics, in order to promote progress. In this process, it is the cultural approach that will need to be transformed, not only the translation of canonical texts. Yet all such interpretations, whether local or global, will require to be both contextual and dialogical if they are to be accepted and the goal achieved.

On a grass root level it is important to raise awareness of such a basic problem in all religions. Our speech (including hate speech) and our actions (including all kinds of physical violence) are steered/controlled by our thinking and by our emotions. Therefore there is a growing interest in learning mindfulness. Mindfulness-based awareness does not only mean to observe one's own body and breathing, but also to control one's own emotions and thoughts. The goal is to become emotionally balanced.

Literature

Grung, A. H. (2017). Transreligious Critical Hermeneutics and Gender Justice: Contested Gendered Spaces. In U. Winkler, L. Rodríguez Fernández & O. Leirvik (eds.), *Contested Spaces, Common Ground. Space and Power Structures in Contemporary Multireligious Societies* (162–175). Leiden: Brill/Rodopi.

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