Religion and gender discrimination

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Abstract. Is religion the root of female oppression? Is gender discrimination a prerogative of religion, or does it also characterize philosophy, cultural circles and academies? In order to answer such questions, the author underlines how female mysticism has been misunderstood and misjudged by many pious and enlightened persons. In particular, women’s writings have often been ignored. As a matter of fact, humanity has always been affected by misogyny. That is why women have been confined and treated as if their style of thinking and writing was a minor or a different one. According to the author, female thinking may be the turning point in developing our culture; it could offer a great help in rethinking law, politics and religion.

Keywords: Female Mystics, Religion and Woman, Gender Discrimination.

1. Under Special Surveillance

Giacomo da Vitry was a preacher and an orator of great talent. He was also an expert on religious movements and the leader of an important reform within the Church. In the biography of Mary of Oignies, the Author provides an important and passionate point of view of feminine holiness, as manifested in the Diocese of Liège. In La Vita – the first spiritual biography of a woman in the middle Ages – he describes in great detail the divisiones gratiarum of visionaries, outlining the way they lived: asceticism, fasting, mortification of the body, vigils, prayers, the struggle against demons… in short: a virtuous life and a life of grace.

Although his descriptions are quite detailed, Giacomo fails in mentioning the writings and ignore the words of the holies - words that are so interesting because of their nature, at the same time, a metaphysical and a poetical one (Pozzi 2004, 21). This lack of attention seems to imply that feminine holiness is something that could be lived, but not thought.

In addition, female mystics are less convincing than males. Holy women tend toward immoderation, because of their femininity. They tend to be seduced as they tend to be seductive. Regarding to their doctrines, a refined and prudent expert of genuinely religious phenomena as Gerson does not seem to have doubts: we do not know if female intellect is able to understand the wisdom of God, but we do know that women’s doctrine – showy like the leaves of the fig tree cursed by Jesus – do not offer any fruit, except for the apple of Sodom with its disgusting ash pulp.

We’ve been mentioning the ideas of Giacomo de Vitry and John Gerson, who probably were much less misogynistic than many others contemporaries. However, their thoughts demonstrate that the relation between holiness and women – as the relation between religion (establishment) and women – has always been, at least, an uncomfortable juxtaposition.

2. Forced to silence, forced to wear a veil

The link that binds religion and woman is made of lights and shadows. The Old Testament seems to state that women are less important than men. Because of her impurity, a woman was not allowed to participate in the public cult, she could not read holy books or attend to festivity, such as Easter. Moreover, she could not be a legal witness. Prophets – as Miriam, Aronne’s sister (Esod, 15, 20-21), Debora (who, in that time were judge in Israel: Judges, 4, 4-5) and Huda (Second Book of Kings, 22, 14-16) – were only rare exceptions.
Regarding the Gospel of Christ, it is sufficient to remember the first Epistle to Timothy (2, 11-15):

“Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, not to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression”

Also the First Epistle to Corinthians (14, 34-35)

“The women are to keep silence in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their husband at home. For it is improper for a woman to speak in church”

Considering the clothing allowed inside the church, we note that women, unlike males, must wear a veil, as a sign of submission and belonging: “for man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman’s sake, but woman’s has for the man’s sake (1 Corinthians, 11, 8-10).

Wearing the veil was a custom for the times and a sign of belonging. It was necessary to prevent a feminine prerogative: the game of seduction.

In the Quran (Surah XXIV, 31) it is written that females should wear a long veil, for they should not show their beauty to others than their husbands, their fathers, the fathers of their husbands or their son. Even more, in the Quran (Surah IV, 43, V, 6) it is written that believers who have touched a woman should clear themself with water or betake themselves to pure earth, before start praying.

Women have always been seen as if they were inferior to men, so inferior to deserve hell. As a matter of fact, an Islamic tradition handed down by Sahih Al-Bukari (Sunnah) states that most of the damned are women. Women are dangerous and impure, for they have a dangerous and impure body such as dangerous and impure thoughts. Women are always ungrateful to their husbands, they are foolish and they lack of faith. That is why there was a custom of not touching a woman’s hand and the custom of not teaching them to write.

An interpretation of the Silence of the Virgin says:

“It is essential to have the consent of a virgin (for the marriage, ndt). I said “a virgin feels shy”. The Prophet said “Her silence means her consent”. Some people said “if a man falls in love with an orphan slave girl or a virgin and she refuses him and then he makes a trick by bringing two false witnesses to testify that he has married her, and then she attains to the age of puberty and agrees to marry him and the judge accept the false witness and the husband know that the witnesses were false ones, he may consummate his marriage”.

Misogyny has many others assumptions. As a matter of fact, the mentioned statements and rules complicated the relationship between women and religion. For many years, Religion has been granting privileges to men. For a long time, Religion has been impending women. We wonder if we should blame Religion itself for all of the mentioned or it just depends on a certain cultural and political context.

It is sure is that the relation between religion and women is important for the community. It is inside real communities that concrete spaces of freedom and equality are extended or, otherwise, reduced.

For example, when a model of authority once based on spiritual gifts changed into a model based on patriarchal domination, the power to administer the community and to dictate doctrine belonged to a chief chosen between the householders.

As a representative and spokesman for God inside the community, this chief claimed to himself the gift of prophecy. Thus, to women were denied the chance to be elected to the
episcopate. This prohibition was stated in deference to the theory which said that a woman could never be in charge of a group of men. It seems to be no place for an her-story, in this his-story.

Within the shadows and problems mentioned, we can find some lights. We do remember Saint Paul mulier taceat in ecclesia, but, on the other hand, we also remember his Letter to Galati (3, 28): “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, there is no male or female”. Moreover, the birth of Jesus Christ implied a complete revolution of the old society. For example, he forgave the woman taken in adultery. After his dead, Jesus Christ appeared to Magdalene and to other women, without respecting the ancient rule which did not recognize the possibility of a female witness.

3. A Brief history of mulierum philosopharum

Is gender discrimination a prerogative of religions (institutions) or does it affects also philosophy (philosophical circles and academies)?

In Plato’s dialogues we read of a very few women. The Master is a man. He is inspired by Muses: Science, History, Rhetoric and Philosophy, but he does not study or discuss with Female Scientist o Female Philosophers. In the most important moments of his life, Socrates does not accept women’s companionship. When he had to live his last afternoon, Delo’s ship arrived and so did his friend: Appollodoro, Critobulo, Ermogene, Eschine, Ctesippo... only Plato was not there. Socrates needed to talk with his friends about the most important themes, such as life and death. That is why, women had to be departed, in order to avoid their laments and outbursts: someone should take Santippe home (Phaedo 60a) because the moment required calm and courage.

Women are whiners, mouthy and frivolous. It seems that they cannot be good philosophers or deal whit good philosophers. Philosophy itself could be considered as a subtle art, which consist in the ability of shutting down women’s beak (Pagès 2010). Many philosophers has been writing about female treachery. Many examples can be found in the books of Descartes, Leibniz, Malebanche, Spinoza, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche...

In his Pragmatic Anthropology, Kant writes that the erudite woman use a book as a clock: she brings it with her just to show everybody that she has one, although it is still or does not work with the sun. In the theory of law, Kant underlines that we have a right to “own any external object as if it was a thing”, we also have the right to “use it as person”: “men buy women, couples buy sons and family buy maids”.

Although there are many women in the history of philosophy – Diotima, Ipparchia, Ipazia, Plotina, Idelgarda di Bingen, Cristina di Lorena, Elisabetta di Boemia, Lucrezia Marinelli, Suor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Margaret Cavendish, Mary Astell... – none of them and none of their thoughts as been handed down through the centuries. Once again, we could argue that women cannot be philosophers. This is a matter of fact which does not depend on fortune, on a set of causes or on a special curse, it depends on the masculine nature of philosophy itself. Philosophy deals with abstraction and philosophers are messengers of what is universal. On the other hand, Women’s intelligence strictly depends on their senses: they have a monopoly on what is particular and finished. As If Women were deep-rooted to the ground, they are not capable of abstract thinking.

In the Seducer’s diary we read that woman is substance, man is reflexion. Moreover, woman existence is for another being, she herself does not exists, she is nothing but a man’s dream. As to say, she has a dream existence, similar to vegetal life. That is why also the spiritual part of a woman has got something vegetative (Kierkegaard 2012, 201-106)

4. Checkmate

Ideas on women, their worth and fails, has been influenced by a philosophical and cultural
tradition which recognize that male have the capability of being creative and the attitude to
transcend nature. This same tradition teaches that women can only deal with immanence as they
depend on nature. As a consequence, this tradition spread worldwide the idea of a superiority of
men.

The Church has been swinging between the rejection and the negation of the feminine – Eva
was blamed for the damnation of humanity – and the deep respect of Mother Mary, who saved the
world (Guerra Medici 1996, 11).

What we do need to underline – more than ever in the era we are living, characterized by the
crisis of ideologies as by the castling of Church and institutions which tries to defend their opinions
– more than their beliefs or their mission – is the extra-ordinariness of feminine thoughts and
writings. Feminine style of writing is based on two important terms of spirituality, two words that
could be pronounced by none but by a woman.

These two words are Within and Beyond. As Laura Bosio writes (2012, VIII): in as hosting,
which means becoming empty in order to receive, as a projection towards the outside: searching
and waiting, as a condition of relating to others. Beyond, which means awareness of the limit which
includes its opposite. It means that is necessary to let go stratified certainties by risk different
worlds and languages. It means willing to accept the risk of jumping over each horizon: in order to
meet the further, the infinite and the inexhaustible.

Inside a closed room, inside an hermitage, inside a concentration camp, where enchanted eyes
only have to read in order to reach the things they long for, women ceases to be trapped inside a
predetermined order (as a patriarchal, political, social or theological one), so they can start moving
towards a radical otherness. Simone Weil can help us in explaining these concepts. With the
freedom and the clarity required, she pretended that all elements of faith were rethought. Without
any hesitation, she suggested the opportunity of abstaining from dogma, in the relationship with
God.

In the Letter to a priest it is written:

“Dogmas are not something you can state. There are some things that we have to look from
far away, with care, respect and love. As the bronze serpent, whose virtue was to cure them who
watched. Such a careful look and a deep love can help the soul in recoiling recoil a light source
which illuminates all aspects of human life on earth. Dogmas lose their virtue as they are stated”
(Weil 2011, 50).

Dogmas lose their meaning as soon as they are stated. We need careful eyes and a loving soul
to find a source of light. The relationship between the woman and the Other – despite the obvious
differences – is marked by a singular intimacy and by an unconditional frankness. Furthermore,
when women meets the Other, they accept the difference, and with it the power and energy of the
Other. Women meet their God, that is, the relationship, and at the same time, they refuse any
structural rigidity. Women do not accept those visions of things that have been once fixed and are
forever imposed. Quoting Luisa Muraro’s The friends of God and the God of Women, we could say
that the relationship between women and God overflow all boundaries between reality and
transcendence. An overflow does not know and does not respect, just like the raging water of a
river, it does not only goes over the banks, it breaks them.