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Gender in Religion? Religion in Gender? : Commentary on Theory and Research on Gender and Religion

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GENDER IN RELIGION? RELIGION IN GENDER? COMMENTARY ON THEORY AND RESEARCH ON GENDER AND RELIGION

GENDER IN RESEARCH ON RELIGION – INTRODUCTION

In recent years the concept of gender has become one of the key categories used in social sciences and in the field of religious studies and its varied dimensions (see: Avishai, Jafar, Rinaldo 2015; Calef 2009; Joy 2010; Woodhead 2007). According to Morny Joy (2010), as well as Afshan Jafar, Rachel Rinaldo and Orit Avishai (2015), we can point to special features and connotations of the concept of gender in this research. Therefore, gender is often understood in research on religion as a descriptive and historical category. This means that it depicts particular life situations of women (rarely men) in the context of religion, including their religious experiences, religious practices in everyday life and at varied levels of religious order (cultural, individual and institutional ones).[1] Gender in this interpretation serves not as an abstract tool of sociological analysis, but as an empirical and very essentialist category (Joy 2010). It implies that the concept of gender describes the fates of a concrete community of religious women (and this community is understood as a homogenous and biological one),

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  [1] This descriptive and idiographical interpretation of gender is not typical only of studies on religion, but also generally for gender studies (Norlander 2003; Scott 1986; Titkow 2011). Kerstin Norlander notes that contemporary gender studies often lack theoretical discussions. This is particularly visible in the constructionists' research, where the assumption about "constructing" femininity or masculinity is mainly a rhetorical statement, not grounded in methodological or ontological explanations (Norlander 2003: 1).

rather than patterns of the practices reproducing gender rules regardless of the anatomical sex of the social actors following them.

This descriptive spirit is visible in one of the most important classical books, *They Call Her Pastor: A New Role for Catholic Women*, by Ruth Wallace (1992), concerning the activities of women in small Catholic organisations. This idiographic conceptualisation of gender also features Polish research and texts. The feminist and critical works of Magdalena Środa on the involvement of the Roman Catholic Church in the Polish public sphere (2010), Klaudyna Świstow's anthropological analysis on the community of Catholic women in Polish villages (2006), and Marta Bierca's ethnographic investigations in Roztocze and the Vistula Lagoon (2006) fall into this category. This understanding of gender is also visible in the theological reflections of Elżbieta Adamiak (1999).

It is certainly possible to find numerous exceptions to this idiographic perspective in social research on religion. A special issue of the journal *Gender and Society* (2013), with articles dedicated to relations between gender and religions, serves as a good example of nomothetic investigations. Gender is conceptualised there as an abstract, theoretical category, going beyond concrete experiences of embodied social actors, and comprises identity, institutional and structural dimensions. The growing interest in analysis of gender understood as practice shows a conceptual shift in studies on gender and religion, and goes beyond the essentialist framework. This understanding of gender is closely linked with the concept of agency (Avishai, Jaffar and Rinaldo 2015: 8–12). In this context, women's practices undertaken in the situation of exclusion from the structures of religious power are interpreted as subversive or transgressive towards these structures, or compensating for the experience of exclusion and inequality as well as lack of formal power. Gender practices therefore in fact serve as mechanisms and tools for transforming or reproducing (reflexively or not) religious orders. The research carried out by Avishai on Judaism (2008) and Sara Bracke (2003, 2008) and Saba Mahmood (2004) on Islam are prime examples of focus on gender practices. Linda Woodhead, referring to similar phenomena, speaks of tactical strategies implying working within the existing orders but pushing beyond them (Woodhead 2007: 573). In Polish social sciences, agency is a central theoretical concept in Agnieszka Kościańska's (2009) research on the movement of Brahma Kumaris and Katarzyna Leszczyńska's work on women in the organisations of the Catholic Church (2016). Among the contributions to our volume, the texts by Krzysztof Arcimowicz, Anna Hojeczko and Marta Warat come close to an idiographic approach to understanding gender; those by Inga Koralewska, Agnieszka Pasieka and Sylwia Urbańska employ the concept of gender as practice, and they all focus on the agency of women.

GENDER AND RELIGION – MULTIDIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS

Research on the relationship between gender – conceived in broad terms and interpreted as descriptive but also in analytical and abstract categories – and the religious field is tackled in various ways. One approach to categorising the existing research is to introduce the dimensions of analysis of religion of *micro*, *meso* and *macro* (see also Leszczyńska 2016). Thus we can speak of studies which draw particular attention to processes and practices concerning

individual experiences in religious orders (on the micro level), focus on the institutional (meso level) or cultural and structural contexts (macro level). These three levels are analytically distinctive, albeit entangled and dynamic in social reality.

Focus on the individual dimension comprises an important part of studies on the relations between gender and religion. Here, the differences between women's and men's religiosity and religious identity draw the most attention. Scholars usually employ essentialist and constructivist heuristic strategies to conceptualise these differences (Francis 1997). The essentialist tradition (especially *gender orientation theories*) assumes that the differences between the religiosity of men and women are inherent in biological sex characteristics. Women's religiosity as expressed in high involvement in religious practices and religious community thus relates to their emotionality and connection with nature. On the contrary, men's low level of religiosity reflects their "natural" rationality and wisdom. Gender is interpreted in these analyses as characteristic of an individual, and not as an element of institutions or social structure. The constructivist tradition, especially *gender role socialisation theories* and *structural location theories*, seeks the causes of differences in religiosity between women and men in social conditions and cultural experiences. The former theories see the differing socialisation of men and women as responsible for creating women's inclination towards emotionality, irrationality and community. Therefore, this makes women more "prone" to being religious. In the latter group of theories of structural location, women's roles and positions in the family, and particularly their involvement in care practices, serve as an explanation for their high religiosity. The differences in religiosity between women and men are also conceptualised by emphasising micro and macro interconnections. For example, Alan S. Miller and Rodney Stark (2002) employ religiosity as an intersectional category related to gender and the broader axionormative system. Along similar lines, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2003) underline the relations between religiosity, egalitarianism and religious culture. We will return to this topic in the last part of the article.

The individual dimension on the link between gender and religion is examined in two of the articles in our volume. Pasieka, following the anthropological conception of agency and gender practices as conceptualised by Abu-Lughod (1986) and Kościanska (2009), researches the relationships among gender, speech, and power as manifested in priest-parishioner relations in a Roman Catholic parish in rural Poland. Koralewska also focuses on women's religiosity. She investigates relations between processes of individualisation, religious emancipation and (re)negotiation of meanings of gender practices and roles of Polish migrant women in Iceland.

Another stream of research on relations between gender and religion focuses on institutionalised religious orders, and in particular on religious organisations. They are usually examined and deliberated in the categories of the oppressive orders which restrict and limit women's (rarely men's) actions and opportunities for their fulfilment. This approach to the study of gender in religious organisations usually applies the perspective of feminist critical studies (Stacey and Gerard 1990) with the aim to diagnose discrimination fields and spaces of inequalities. The cultural barriers (Ecklund 2006), structural restrictions (de Gasquet 2010) and everyday difficulties (Fobes 2004) experienced by women in institutionalised religions are presented here as deeply rooted in religious traditions and doctrine (see "stained glass-ceiling" – Adams 2007; de Gasquet 2010; Sullins 2000; Higgins 2011). The work of Polish

scholars like Magdalena Środa (2010) as well as the early texts of Agnieszka Graff (2008, 2010) and Agnieszka Kościańska (2009) fall into this category of research.

Interestingly enough, research focusing on diagnosis of the barriers and structural/ organisational difficulties for women and men (even if to a lesser extent) is typical not only of feminist investigations. It is also commissioned by those religious organisations who aspire to introduce structural and institutional solutions to strengthen equal opportunities for men and women in religion (see de Gasquet 2010; Lehman 1980). This is often the case of egalitarian-oriented Christian Churches, especially those functioning in egalitarian and religiously pluralistic socio-cultural contexts. The analyses commissioned by the Protestant Churches searching for solutions to support gender equality and stimulate the advancement of women in the formal power structures illustrate this case well (Lehman 1980; de Gasquet 2010: 23, Leszczyńska 2016). Also, the Anglican Church's support provided to research projects oriented towards identification of the main barriers to and conditions of the low involvement of men in Church life falls into this category (Levitt 2010). Another example would be the research supported by the Episcopate of Australia, *The Research Project on Women's Participation in the Catholic Church in Australia*, conducted in the 1990s, aimed at investigating barriers to women's participation in the structures of the Roman Catholic Church (Australian Episcopal Conference 1999). The research findings resulted in the establishment of institutions responsible for the monitoring of gender inequalities in the Church (*The Office for the Participation of Women* and *The Council for Australian Catholic Women*). The traditional standpoint of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland on the involvement of women in its formal structures (Szwed 2015), and a highly critical view of the concept of gender (Szwed and Zielińska 2017, also Warat in this volume) illustrate the opposite attitude of religious organisations.

The categories of agency and subjectivity have extended the scope of interests of scholars researching gender in religious institutions. Here, gender practices, understood as processes of renegotiating human experiences in religious structures, play the major role. As a result, many scholars criticise the perception of women's roles in religious communities and organisations as determinist and restricted. They also object to defining women as passive recipients of religious rules. Instead, they stress the active involvement of women in these communities and organisations as well as their active role in (re)interpretation of religious tradition. In studies on gender agency in institutionalised religions, we could point to the interesting work, mentioned in our introduction, of Orit Avishai (2008, 2010). This focuses on the involvement of women in Orthodox Jewish communities understood as a process of doing religion. Other examples include the anthropological analyses of Saba Mahmood (2004) and Sara Bracke about active roles of women in Islam, particularly in fundamentalist movements (2008, 2003). In this stream of research we can also find analysis on Catholicism and involvement of Catholic women in producing and reproducing organisational and symbolic structures of religion, e.g. the research of Christel Manning (1997) and Elaine Howard Ecklund (2003) in American Catholic parishes. In Polish sociology, research on agency and active roles of laywomen and laymen in the administrative organisations of the Roman Catholic Church serves as a good example (Leszczyńska 2016). This approach, focusing on agency as a dimension of human actions in an organisational context, may also be found in our collection in the abovementioned article

by Pasieka. In addition, Urbańska analyses activities of women in religious communities and organisations as processes of renegotiation of identities and as transformations of structural spaces and positions, but she puts her analysis in a transnational context.

Yet another dimension of the relations between gender and religion in the scholarly work of recent years focuses on the impact religious political and public presence has had on shaping gender politics and identities. This stream of research co-occurs with a growing interest in the social sciences in the de-privatisation (Casanova 1994) or *re*-publicisation (Herbert 2011) of religion. The arguments here could be placed somewhere along a continuum, with two contrasting views at each end. At one extreme, the secularism as expressed by the classical liberal view stresses the need to delegate religion to the private sphere (Locke 1983; Rorty 1995). It also corresponds with the conventional understanding of the link between modernisation and religion. With the progress of the former, the societal and individual significance of the latter diminishes and becomes a characteristic of the private sphere as a consequence of, among others, functional and institutional differentiation (Zielińska 2009: 235–236).

The concept of gender adds another dimension to understanding the public presence of religion. Studies from various parts of the world (e.g. Turkey, Israel, Poland, Mexico) and from various religious traditions (e.g. Christian, Muslim, Jewish) show that the "marriage" between religion and politics proves to be problematic from a gender equality point of view in fields of both public policies and socially acceptable identities (for different case studies see Amuchástegui et al. 2010; Arat 2010; Bernstein and Jakobsen 2010; Guzmán et al. 2010; Halperin-Kaddari and Yadgar 2010; Drezgić 2010; Bijelic 2008). The religious and conservative visions of gender roles and family, often linked to nationalistic ideologies, may result in limiting women's opportunities in the public sphere (e.g. women's political involvement, employment options), preventing democratisation in the private sphere, and limiting individual rights of women and men who do not comply with the religious concepts of femininity and masculinity (e.g. non-heterosexual women and men, transgender individuals). In such contexts, Woodhead (2007: 571) speaks of the consolidating function of religion towards gender differences and inequalities. She also links it to the gendered distribution of power. Along similar lines, Anne Phillips argues that public religion's negative impact on gender equality corresponds to its formal and informal power stemming from close relations to politics, rather than with religion per se. In the latter case, various accommodation strategies allow us to reinterpret the unfavourable or discriminative impact (as indicated in the section on gender and religion at individual and institutional levels). On the contrary the former, through the alliances between religion, politics and state, may create coercive policies or changes in the dominant discourses resulting in limitations of the rights or needs of individuals (religious and non-religious, women and men) (Phillips 2009).

Secularism understood as policy or institutional arrangements constraining (to various degrees) the public presence of religion is seen as supportive of gender equality. The public sphere "freed" from religion offers a space for empowerment of women and men (especially those not complying with the hegemonic, religiously sustained gender models, e.g. non-heteronormative men). Also, secularisation conceptualised as a decline of religious significance in the lives of individuals is seen in a similar way (Razavi and Jenichen 2010; Woodhead 2007; Inglehart and Norris 2003). As documented by Inglehart and Norris, the declining

religiosity related to the growing economic prosperity of societies and declining levels of insecurity correlates with greater social acceptance and practice of gender equality (Inglehart and Norris 2003). However, some scholars suggest that secularist policies and secularisation processes may actually have a reverse impact. Woodhead (2007: 572) links the rise of support for gender equality and introduction of various policies with emergence of conservative or fundamentalist religious streams and cultural backlash favouring traditional gender roles.

The Polish case, with the visible public presence and political involvement of the Roman Catholic Church, illustrates well the implications of the coalition between religion, politics and state as expressed above in Phillips's argument. The Church's active involvement in the debates on and process of drafting the law limiting access to legal abortion, critical reactions to various attempts aimed at strengthening women's rights (i.e. debates on sexual education, the equality law, domestic violence and violence against women, reproductive rights and IVF, same-sex partnerships) prove that in the Polish case the "marriage of religion and politics" is problematic for gender equality. Studies investigating these relations see secularism as a necessary policy and secularisation as a desired development for advancing gender equality in Poland (Graff 2014; Korolczuk 2014; Heinen and Portet 2010; Kramer 2009; Kulczycki 1995).[2]

The contributions to our collection by Krzysztof Arcimowicz, Anna Hojdeczko and Marta Warat fall under this category of research on the relations between gender and religion. They all focus on the intersections between public presence and political involvement of religion (the Roman Catholic Church in Poland) and gender issues (equality and construction of gender identities). At the same time, they offer diversified perspectives and as a result provide a multi-perspective account of the links between religion and gender at the macro level. Hojdeczko analyses the religious discourse on women as reflected in the magazine *Exorcist*, identifying itself within the Catholic tradition. She shows how the understanding of gender as conceptualised in the formal discourse of the Roman Catholic Church, identifying women with Mary, Mother of Jesus, or/and on the model of mother, is reproduced in the popular religious discourse of "Exorcist". Arcimowicz also takes the Church's formal discourse as a starting point for his research. However, overcoming the tendency in research on gender to focus only on women, his analysis aims to reveal the ways the Church socially and culturally constructs the category of man and masculinity. Finally, Warat focuses on the flux between religion and nationalism. Her analysis of the debates over the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence as reflected in two high-circulation Polish dailies allows her to reconstruct the nationalist-religious discourse. She also discusses the impact of this discourse on the development and perception of equality policies.

At the other end of the continuum, embracing the public presence of religion, we find post-secularist visions, allowing religion to be actively involved in the public sphere and the use of religious arguments in public deliberations (Habermas 2008; Wolterstorf 1997). Here,

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[2] Similar tendencies occurred in the transitory context of other post-socialist societies where the dominant historical Christian Churches attempted, with support from the political parties, to (re)build their influence over the entire society. They also propagated traditionalist views on women and men and opposed gender equality (Drezgić 2010; Bijelic 2008).

contextualisation and conceptualisation of the link between modernisation and religion is much less unidirectional. It focuses on local cultural and social conditions (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012; Stephan 2001). The post-secular turn, questioning the need for privatisation of religion in modern Western democracies, also challenged a view linking secularity with greater support for and practice of gender equality. Research directly linked to redefinition of agency as discussed above, focusing especially on women from religious minorities, reveals the hegemonic status of secularism that imposes limitations on these women's religious rights and social statuses. The rhetoric embedded in such discourse is visible in the justifications (e.g. safeguarding gender equality and women's rights, the secular nature of the public or political sphere) for punitive policies aimed at migrant or minority groups in the West (Reilly 2013: 2; Phillips 2009: 41; Butler 2008). In this context, Joan Scott calls for an intersectional approach to genealogies of secularism that will allow the untangling of secularism and problematise its relations with gender emancipation (Scott 2009). The post-secularist turn is particularly visible in scholarly interest in the rights and identities of religious women in countries with established secularist policies (e.g. the headscarf controversy in France and other European countries, the new veiling movement in Turkey see: Kowalska 2009, Rosenberger and Sauer 2012). This stream of research seems to be absent in the Polish context, most probably due to its far less secularised, less pluralised and less religiously diversified context, especially in comparison with Western European countries.

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