

Gender and religions: perspectives on the past and present

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The seminar *Gender and Religions: Perspectives on the Past and Present* is the second event organized within the Gender and Religions Convention, which was also joined by the University of Macerata in 2017. The agreement has been formalized with the participation of 30 universities and about 25 entities throughout Italy and will be active until 2019. The aim of the convention is to encourage, support and develop, through inter-university cooperation at national and international level, research and studies (interdisciplinary and inter-religious) on the encounter between gender, religion and religiosity.

Held on 28 November 2018, the seminar focused on the issue of gender and religious differences, through a multidisciplinary, or rather trans-disciplinary, perspective embracing the past and present to reflect on the future.

The various presentations in the programme ranged from philosophy to medicine, from history to sociology and theology, bringing together perspectives, at times distant, but united by an interest in reflecting on and debating these issues. They opened a window on topical issues arising from distant traditions.

The contribution made by Serena Noceti, of the Feminist Theological Movement, entitled *Women and the Church: a look at current affairs*, was an accurate reconstruction of some fundamental stages of the process of transformation of the issue of women and the feminine in Catholic theology over several decades, highlighting especially the fundamental issues of the public dimension, speech, power and representation directly involving the relevance of women within the Church. In discussing the text, Donatella Pagliacci also stressed the

topic of gender citizenship and the importance of the active participation of women in the public life of the Catholic Church, in the different forms that have been historically possible from time to time.

The point of view of young people on current events and their relationship with the religious dimension was introduced by the presentation by Isabella Crespi, *Young people, religion and gender differences: the results of a survey on young people in Macerata*, and discussed by Maria Letizia Zanier. Her research saw the participation of over 2000 students from the University of Macerata and all degree courses and the first results were presented at the seminar. As regards the relationship between gender and religiosity, the theme of the religious socialization of young people is meeting with renewed interest after a long absence from debate and religious studies. The debate on religious socialization has gone hand in hand, in recent decades, with the change in roles and stereotypes of gender and with the growing emancipation of women. The data show that we are facing a change in the relationship between religion and society and, at the same time, a demand for religion from the new generations that no longer necessarily follow socializing paths bound and marked by families or associations. In all these areas, religion, and particularly the Catholic faith in Italy, seems to have missed out on a renewed generational and gender pact and secularization appears more pronounced among the younger generations even in the face of their parents' constant religious affiliation. In particular, young men seem to be in the greatest crisis, testifying to a reversal of the trend, albeit in parallel with a decline in religiosity even among young women. Despite the substantially positive situation favourable to the persistence of a prevailing Catholic religious model (though still a minority), the weight of youth disaffection is very great, even in the face of the presence of various types of socializing paths that are uncertain in nature and that often do not have the

same religious outcome as their parents'. The question arises as to the future and weight that the generational change that is seeing a constantly growing disaffection of young people with religiousness will have.

The relationship between gender and religion was also discussed in addressing the topic of health and medicine. Walter Malorni described in detail the commitment of the Italian National Institute of Health in disseminating gender-specific medicine, illustrating how gender-specific research opens up new and important avenues in understanding both research and medical practice and, last but not least, health policies. In particular, a gender-specific approach to medicine underscores the need to pay special attention to biological differences and the bodily dimension, which inevitably risks neglecting the female side, especially in research and care. Another relevant topic in medicine concerning the relationship between genders is the dimension of religious belonging of patients, which can at times cause difficulties in medical practice (from the clinical history to the recognition of symptoms and the administration of treatment or medical practices) because men and women, in different situations, refuse or do not access treatment due to cultural and religious differences and misunderstandings. In her presentation as discussant, Ines Corti focused on the theme of universal rights and their relationship with cultural rights different from those shared in medical practice in different cultures. So how do we deal with the problem in a multicultural society?

The philosophical point of view was illustrated by Daniela Verducci who presented the case of *God in the phenomenology of the feminine in religion* by A.T. Tymieniecka. The philosopher, in her intense and tormented relationship as a woman with the Catholic world, repeatedly questioned her relationship with Pope John Paul II for the simple fact that she is a female philosopher, thus transforming this relationship into a

religious incident that drives her to reflect on the condition of women and on speaking of God in the feminine starting from a phenomenology of the person through actions. In Mina Sedhev's discussion, the theme of feminine phenomenology was underlined as an approach that starts from speculative rationality and the power of males also in language.

The contribution by Amanda Rosini (McGill University, Montreal, Canada), *The lack of sexual categorization and the assumptions of gendering in the Hebrew bible*, focused on the interpretation of the female figure and gender roles in the Jewish religion. For several decades, feminist scholars have sought to identify the social constructs that shape and define the categories of what is understood as 'masculine' and 'feminine'. However, in their search to understand the categories generated through gender, feminist biblical scholars have come to emphasize gender categories as performative roles, i.e., as acts, norms and conventions associated with masculinity and femininity. Therefore, in biblical literature, gender is often an identity that is acted out and imposed on the characters of the narrative and should therefore be considered separate from the actual biological gender. If this is indeed the case, biblical scholars, using feminist theory on gender-specific performa-

tive identity, may achieve a different understanding of the role of women.

Roberto Lambertini's contribution, discussed by Francesca Bartolacci, focused on Marsilius of Padua and William of Ockham, undoubtedly among the most famous political theorists who, in the first half of the fourteenth century, opposed the theories that supported papal theocracy. Examined from a gender perspective, they differ significantly because the former, in line with the prevailing conceptions of its time, excluded women from that *universitas civium* from which all legitimate power in the political community emanates. In Ockham's ecclesiology, on the other hand, in case of necessity (mind you, not in a 'normal' situation) women have the right/duty to defend the true faith, even if all the faithful men, starting with the pope, were against it.

Elisabetta Patrizi's presentation focused on the history of the women's conservatory founded in Rome by the noblewoman Livia Vipereschi in 1668. This is one of the most interesting pages in the history of female conservatories. When we talk about female conservatories, we are referring to those educational and welfare institutions typical of the modern age, created to meet the needs of protection and education of women in situations of difficulty because they lack

the protection of a male figure (orphaned and abandoned girls, former prostitutes and prisoners, widows and women with difficult marriages). The case of the Conservatory of the Viperesche is unique in its kind for the centuries-old history of the edifice, which now houses a boarding house for female university students, and for the ability shown over the centuries to remodel its appearance without losing the bond with its origins. Edoardo Bressan, in his comments, stressed that the study conducted on the Roman Conservatory of the Viperesche allows us to go beyond the paradigm of the 'great confinement' of the poor in the modern age, following instead the line that interprets the phenomena of 'discipline' – both social and religious – in the light of the Catholic renewal that preceded and followed the Council of Trent, as can be seen among other things from the charitable spirituality of the foundress and the Carmelite Order to which the Conservatory was bound.

The presence of women and men of different generations and sensitivities gathered around the table was one of the most strongly desired and important aspects of this seminar, which also saw the presence of guests who wanted to share their point of view on the subject, combining the scientific perspective with that of professional experience and operations.