GENDER A VÝZKUM
GENDER AND RESEARCH

Gender Dimensions in the Study of Religions and Spiritualities

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The intersection of Gender Studies and Religious Studies has become the subject of increasing discussion in both disciplines. This is not only a matter of mere academic or specialised concern, or about a field of research that is yet untapped; it is also a current social and political issue. Not only in the Czech context do we see just how much of an influence religious institutions have in secular societies in terms of political decision-making relating to both gendered and (non-)heteronormative practices (traditional examples being the issue of marriage for non-heterosexual couples, the adoption (or not) of the Istanbul Convention, and the issue of access to or restrictions of reproductive rights). However, gender is also an important category in discussions going on within churches – for example, the question of the ordination of women. However, as the authors Corredor (2019) or Graff and Korolczuk (2022) and others point out, church institutions of world religions are significant and formative global actors in the so-called anti-gender movements. Anti-gender movements differ on the national and local levels in their varying degrees of radicality against the democratising liberal efforts to redefine the social and ecclesiastical status quo. In their redefinition, the democratising liberal efforts strive to open religious traditions to greater gender and social diversity and equality, notions frequently countering some established religious traditions. In other words, exploring the intersectionality of gender, religion, and spirituality is for a variety of reasons not only desirable but also necessary.

A clear example of the intersection of Religious Studies and Gender Studies is feminist

theology[1], which is being advanced within different religions, and in a broader sense also in feminist spirituality. These approaches share a common focus on questions of spiritual exploration and experience but do not necessarily remain within the bounds of existing theologies and their key dogmas. While feminist theologies and spiritualities have been developing and evolving in many European countries for more than half a century and in the United States since as far back as the late 18th century, it is only in the 1990s that this began happening in Czechoslovakia and then in the Czech Republic. The recently deceased ThDr. Jana Opočenská, an evangelical theologian and a pastor in the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, who for several decades promoted Czech feminist theology from a Christian standpoint (cf. especially Opočenská 1995) and whose professional contribution is summed up in two commemorative essays inside this issue, long remained alone in this endeavour. Her work, nevertheless, sparked an interest in feminist theology even outside of academic circles.

Czech Gender Studies and Religious Studies have come together at this relatively late date in part because of the erroneous notion that feminism and religion are at odds with each other. It is indeed true that the principles of feminism and those of orthodox traditionalist religion often appear incompatible and are seen to be so on both sides. Contemporary feminism rejects not just a priori patriarchal views and power hierarchies but biological determinism and the dictates of heteronormativity, which is regularly presented as 'natural'. Conservative religious currents (not to mention explicitly fundamentalist ones) are founded on these very principles and see criticism of them as an attack on religion itself. The situation has been changing, however, in the past two decades. There has been a growing interest in feminist theology and spirituality in teaching and research projects in Gender Studies, and many Czech theological faculties (e.g. the Evangelical Theological Faculty and the Hussite Theological Faculty, Charles University) and even some churches (mainly but not only the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren) have been growing more liberal and are promoting a wider discussion in this area, as evidenced by the articles in this issue.

The aim of the editorial team was to present different approaches to gender analyses of religion in a comparative perspective. As such, this thematic issue devotes two articles to Judaism, while four others focus on the Christian context, both from a theoretical perspective, centred on Christian feminist theology, and from a practical perspective, primarily in the form of critical examinations of current practices. Internal heterogeneity thus characterises debates taking place within religious institutions

[1] Here it is important to distinguish between a feminist spirituality, which can pertain to any religious tradition, and feminist spirituality, which is a specific kind of religious/spiritual practice centred on Goddess and which was a creation of the second-wave feminist movement. Its basic tenets are examined later in this editorial.

and in feminism. It is, in our view, valuable that the critical perspectives presented here have primarily emerged from within church environments or are authored by researchers working in Religious Studies or Anthropology.

As already indicated, this thematic issue, titled 'Gender, Religion and Spiritualities', brings together six articles, one of which is written in English. This is the paper by Ivy Helman, uniting the Jewish commandment (mitzvah) to care for the poor with an ecofeminist perspective. Helman argues for expanding the category of the poor so that in the light of the climate crisis faced by humans and our non-human relatives the category encompasses care for the natural environment, as Jewish tradition demands. Judaism is also the focus of the paper by Timea Crofony, who methodologically draws on feminist critical discourse analysis. Working with Jewish women's reflections on the mechitzah published in the *JOFA Journal*, Crofony traces out three distinct conceptions of the mechitzah – as a boundary, as an opportunity, and as a metaphor. Jiří Pavlík's paper, by contrast, takes the reader into the Christian tradition and specifically into the ongoing and still dynamically evolving dispute over the understanding of gender in Roman Catholicism. Examining the document 'As Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a Dialogue on Gender Issues in Education', published in 2019 by the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education, Jiří Pavlík sheds a detailed light on the contradictions in the internal logic underpinning the recommendations on how and whether to discuss issues related to gender in Catholic education and upbringing. Equally current is the article by Zuzana Kostićová. She explores constructions of (primarily female) gender roles and spiritual energy through the example of a cookbook that can also be categorised as spiritual literature, written by the famous cook and Instagram influencer Kamila 'Kamu' Chadimová. Kostićová argues that one can only read Chadimová's *Jak si uvařit vesMÍR* (*How to Cook Your (Own) Universe)* as a work about femininity and spiritual growth if one has a thorough understanding of the basic features that characterise 'alternative' spiritualities. The article by Jan Bierhanzl describes the theoretical underpinnings of ecofeminist thea/ology in the thinking of the iconic feminist theologist Rosemary Radford Ruether, while also examining the issues of structural inequalities and systemic violence, as well as questions within the frame of ecofeminism relating to the vulnerability, precarity, and in/dependence of our lives. This thematic issue concludes with a comparative article by Jakub Ort on the concept of secular autonomy in the discussion of emancipation in the works of Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood. Ort shows that their concepts complement each other and together deepen the discussion of the precarious nature of life.

Gender and Research is interdisciplinary in focus and the mix of perspectives from different fields in this thematic issue fully achieves this aim. Given the multidisciplinary nature of the articles, let us briefly summarise the theoretical foundations and methodological principles involved in gender analysis of religion. The fundamental

question is how we understand the concept of religion: whether we understand it more in the sense of faith and a spiritual quest or more as an institution – be it in an ideological or social sense or in the sense of politics and power. If we understand religion as a spiritual quest, there are no boundaries (such as dogma or doctrine) and it is a question of individual choice – although fulfilling this quest might not be just an individualistic pursuit and might be accompanied by a need for belonging and for sharing with others. Religion in this sense de facto coincides with the notion of spirituality.

If we understand religion in the sense of an institution, this narrows the concept to some extent, but it also clearly structures it. In terms of ideology, religion forms a defined frame of ideas; the edges of this frame, however, may (in the case of liberal currents) be blurry, and this is where theological debates unfold within and outside the institution. In social terms there exists a community; it may be hierarchical to some degree, at the least in the sense that there is a chief authority at its head. This is also an area where a dispute with feminism seems inevitable, particularly over established gender inequalities (women are subordinate to men, non-hetero identities are not respected at all, the church represents a de facto hierarchical power pyramid). When religion is politicised and institutionally asserted, this dispute can assume immense proportions and can become an insurmountable abyss (e.g. in the case of theocracies). In summary, institutionalised religion almost always involves an aspect of power; what matters is the degree to which this power is asserted and in what form and how open or closed this power is to potential criticism and debate.

Let us return for a moment to the question of feminist methodology. It is clear that, in principle, the key category for the gender analysis of religion would be gender. But it is important to note that contemporary feminist thinking places major emphasis on ensuring that gender is not the only criterion of inequality and that other categories (primarily race and class, but also, for example, age, disability, sexuality, culture, and location) are always intersectionally taken into consideration. There are two areas where one can see how gender is constructed: first, it is in the way divinity is conceived of, and second, it is in the conception of humanity.

There are five types of representations of the divine (cf. Knotková-Čapková, 2008: 5–15). Each is distinct but in some ways they may also overlap. The first type involves religions that did not place much emphasis on defining/establishing definitions, and moreover in their early form did not even have a concept of divinity. This would be the case, for example, of early Indian Buddhism, which was essentially non-mystical; it did not reject the mythology of the Vedic cultural context of the time, and it certainly did not label it 'pagan', but it did not create its own mythology until later. Buddha was deified in some streams later on, but in the original Buddhism Buddha was only a teacher.

The second type would be the concept of divinity as a transcendent creative force that is not gendered, and that is abstract, invisible, and is explicitly neutral even in

language – for example, the word 'tat', literally meaning 'it', to denote the primordial concept of being in the Vedic hymns of ancient India, the oldest stratum from which Hinduism evolved. In the philosophical texts of the Upanishads in the early Vedic period, this primordial source of being is then expressed in the concept of 'brahma', which is of a spiritual, transcendent nature (cf., e.g., Zbavitel, 1993). It should be added, however, that the way this primordial source was conceptualised did not in any way prevent the continued existence on the mythological level of deities, gods, and goddesses that were often anthropomorphised and depicted as material 'idols'. It is a question whether this group should also include conceptions of the divine in monotheistic religions. If we were to genuinely see these (monotheistic) representations of the divine as abstract and non-gendered, which is, of course, one possible interpretation, these would include Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Christian feminist theology would support such a perspective. The problem, however, is that in these religions the divine and their representations have become progressively more or less masculinised. For this reason, we class them as a different type below.

The third type would be religions in which divinity is gendered in masculine and feminine forms – there are both gods and goddesses. This is characteristic of many archaic religions in which elements of nature or natural phenomena were deified. This is where we find the basic procreative pair of Heaven and Earth, and though they are usually gendered, with Heaven homologised with the male principle and Earth with the female (e.g. in Hinduism), this is not always the case – for example, in ancient Egyptian mythology the concept is reversed (Nut, the vault of the heavens, is both sister and wife of Eros, who represents Earth). Mountains, rivers, celestial bodies (the sun, moon, and stars), and phenomena such as storms and wind, etc., are also deified and are usually gendered or at least invested with spirituality and/or divinity. However, in religions where this is the case, this conception is not necessarily incompatible with the previous type – for example, in Hinduism we find both this kind of mythology and a philosophical-spiritual conception of a neutral, abstract original source of being. Dualistic conceptions of reverse-gendered cosmic forces can also be seen, for example, in the complementarity of the two opposing principles of yin (feminine, dark, passive) and yang (masculine, light, active) in Chinese Taoism. These two forces are in the real world manifested in recurring periods, where Tao, as the primordial force, the original source of being, occurs in the phase of disharmony, but does not occur in periods of internal harmony, so no opposites exist, and nor, therefore, does our material world.

The fourth type is a concept of feminine divinity, usually the archetype Mother Goddess. This is usually found in religions that see the evolution of life and the world as a cyclical process (again, e.g., Hinduism). The Mother Goddess concept is here usually linked to natural events (the changing seasons) or to the vegetation cycle,

and the womb figures as a powerful metaphor representing the source of life or the place from which all life has emerged and to which it returns. Staying with Hinduism here, it is telling that in the funeral rite, after cremation, the ashes of the deceased are surrendered to water – ideally to the sacred river Ganges, but it can also be a lake. Earth and water (in the form of rivers) are personified in Hinduism as female deities. Similar approaches to nature, however, can also be found in writings on feminist spirituality – for example, by Zsuzsanna Budapest and Carol Christ (both 1992).

If we cite Hinduism as an example of this type, we also need to mention a more abstract metaphysical conceptualisation of the creative, transcendent feminine principle, which is the cosmic force Shakti (which in several Indian languages literally means 'force'). Shakti may also be seen as the supreme transcendent cosmic force, a view maintained by Shaktism, an unorthodox branch of Hinduism. Shakti is also sometimes seen as complementary and equal to the masculine transcendent principle. In mythology, she is often personified as a goddess (e.g. Kali, Durga, or Parvati), and in classical Hinduism she is the divine consort of the god Shiva, who personifies the male creative and procreative principle, or the Mother Goddess, a conception that may refer back to the pantheons of the indigenous peoples of the Indian subcontinent before the arrival of Indo-European tribes, when an important role was played by individual female deities.

The fifth type of conceptualisation of divinity is characteristic of monotheist religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), which each have a single, abstract, and theoretically genderless divinity, but it has been and is significantly masculinised in the practical discourses of their churches and religious communities as well as in language. There are several aspects, however, that can be distinguished. The first is the degree to which the divinity is anthropomorphised, which reflects, among other things, the distance in time between the emergence of these three religions. God, Allah, is the least anthropomorphised in the youngest of the three, Islam. According to the Quran, Allah, must not be assigned any attributes (such as father, king, or judge); the Tanakh and the Bible, however, do give God attributes. Second, there is the key issue here of hermeneutics, as in polysemic Old Hebrew in particular some characteristics of the fatherhood of God could be translated as parenthood, i.e. as not exclusively masculine (cf. Opočenská, 2008: 68-109). Third, there is also the question of archetypal characteristics, their ambivalence and mutability. In all three of these religions, the characteristics of traditionally masculine archetypes (strictness or even severity, authority, power) are intertwined with feminine ones (love, mercy, forgiveness, compassion), but in different proportions. Without wishing to simplistically generalise, we can say that the God of the Tanakh (and thus of the Old Testament) is usually more 'masculine' in this respect than the New Testament Christian God, and then there is Jesus, the Son of God, whom we might call an

androgynous figure, characterised by feminine archetypal qualities in a male body. This is surely one of the reasons why Christology is such a major theme in Christian feminist theology (cf., e.g., Carter Heyward, 1999). In Islam, both sets of archetypes are intertwined in Allah in a somewhat tense way: on the one hand we can point to verses of the Quran calling for harsh punishments (no worse of course than in the Tanakh), while on the other hand we can point to the Basmala, the opening line of every Surah but one (Repentance), which reads 'In the name of God, the Most Gracious, and the Most Merciful'. This aspect of the divine in Islam has also been highlighted by Islamic feminist theologians, such as Leila Ahmed (Ahmed, 1992).

Another interesting comparative aspect is whether a religion is more inclusivist or exclusivist in terms of its conceptualisation of the divine, or in faith. Exclusivist religions ordinarily distance themselves radically from any past concepts, which they not only reject, deeming their form of worship 'paganism' and blasphemy, but also persecute or punish those who practice them, or they did so historically. Inclusivist religions deal little with this issue, their mythologies are often very diverse and multibranched, and they are not marked by religious struggles between different currents and directions. This does not necessarily mean that they are always open or non-discriminatory, as while they may be pluralist in belief, they may also be socially represented by rigidly fixed hierarchies (e.g. the caste and gender hierarchies in Hinduism; cf. Prabhati Mukherjee, 1999, or Manoranjan Mohanty, 2004).

Feministists consider questions of how humanity is conceptualised in religious traditions important. We can therefore ask the following: First, how is gender constructed? Is it a binary construct – biologically determined and fixed, heteronormative, essentialist? Or is it non-binary – dynamic, fluid, non-heteronormative, constructivist? Are there multiple streams, possibilities, and interpretations of gender? Second, where there is a binary conception of humanity as masculine and feminine, is there a fixed hierarchy between them? Is this hierarchy, for example, set out in a canonical way or in multiple creation myths? Are man and woman created at the same time (as suggested in Genesis, chapters 1 and 5, or in the Quranic version of creation), or are women ontologically second, as in Genesis 2, which Simone de Beauvoir critically analysed in *The Second Sex* (published in 1949). Is society then modelled on some form of patriarchy, with male dominance and the subordination of women, as some feminist critics were already saying in the early 1970s about the widespread 'world' religions (cf., e.g., Mary Daly, 1973, and Kate Millett, 1970)? And third, how is sexuality constructed? Is it taboo? Is it heteronormative? Is it intended exclusively for the purpose of procreation and the continuity of gender? Is procreation an obligation – which is not the case in religions that tend towards asceticism? Do ascetic religions (e.g. Buddhism and Jainism) provide women with any alternatives to a subordinate role in the family and society (also

discussed in Rita Gross, 1993)? Is sexuality free or is it disciplined in some way, and is this discipline harsher for women than for men?

The key sources for trying to find answers to these questions are the creation myths. In the monotheistic religions, there is one canonical myth, as presented in the Bible and paraphrased in the Quran; Islamic feminist theology strongly emphasises that, according to the Quran, Adam and Eve were created at the same time and they both also committed the first sin at the same time (Surah 7 The Heights), whereas in the biblical myth, it is the woman who sinned first and seduced men to sin as well (Genesis 3). In non-monotheistic religions, there are usually multiple creation myths, not one canonical myth, so they do not have as fundamental an impact on other ethical concepts.

In the non-monotheistic religions (we do not say 'polytheistic' because, unlike monotheism in the monotheistic religions, polytheism is not a command, only a possibility), it might seem at first glance that the conceptualisation of goddesses would be very empowering for women of those faiths. This is certainly true in so far as there are gendered images of women to which they can turn for help or understanding; in Catholic Christianity, this role is to some extent served by the saints, but saints do not contain divinity. Saints are holy which implies something related to divinity, but not of the same substance as divinity. Saints are, so to speak, of a lower order. In the case of Central and Latin America, this function may be fulfilled by the Virgin of Guadalupe, a figure who combines the concepts of pre-Christian goddess and Christian saint by drawing on the sediments of a precolonial cult of the divine feminine. We need to be cautious, however, if we assume that women believers can identify with goddesses, because there is one crucial difference between 'divine mothers' and 'earthly daughters' in a patriarchal society: divine mothers are powerful and independent from earthly judgements and are able, at will, to create and to destroy in the sense of imposing severe punishment. Earthly women, by contrast, are subject to an androcentric gender order and are certainly neither powerful nor independent. There is moreover a certain essentialisation of the image of goddesses – the role models for women believers are goddesses as *mothers*, not goddesses as women in a more general sense.

Another subject of interest to feminist theology is the sociopolitical context in which sacred religious texts were canonised and who had the power to decide on their final versions at the given time. What is also important is which of these texts became part of common knowledge (and why), and which are known only by people who study them in depth. A typical example of this in the Christian tradition is the widely known second chapter of Genesis about the creation of Eve from Adam's rib, but considerably less well-known is Genesis 1:27 (KJV), which reads: 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them'.

Feminist theology also points out the remarkably similar characterisations of women as dangerous seductresses or generally as persons to be disciplined and led. This image also appeared in later texts across different religions, such as in the writings of the Christian Church Fathers. Or, Buddhologist Alan Sponberg labels some writings of Buddhist monks who generalise the characterisations of women to be 'ascetic misogyny' (Sponberg, 1992). Such images can also be found the Hindu dharmashastras that served as codes of ethics (cf. *Manusmriti*). A decisive factor in these representations turns out to be the discourse of power and the gender order operating in a given society in a given place and time, which has had a retroactive influence on how religious texts have been interpreted and understood. When it comes to interpretation, feminist theology remains far from adopting any fundamentalist perspective, if we understand fundamentalism to be an approach that claims its interpretation to be the only correct one. Feminist theology is open to multiple interpretations and readings that always take into account the historical and social context in which a text was created, how it was produced or reproduced, and any politicisation to which it may have been subjected. Above all, it is not the boundaries between religions that emerge here as the crucial difference in the approach to an interpretation, but rather the boundary (albeit often dynamic and fluid) between orthodox and liberal discourses. In this respect, feminist theologies rank with the liberal discourses, which is to say that they are open to critical interpretations.

According to Rita Gross' (1996) *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction*, United States feminists began to take an interest in religion in the late 1700s with Abigail Adams and Mary Wollstonecraft (1996: 29–31). Feminist interest in religion, during this early period, had many forms, concerns, and reasons. One example of this varying history is the 19th century 'cult of true womanhood', which hoped to reverse Christian stereotypes of women and instead advocated for women as more spiritually attuned as well as morally purer than men (Gross 1996: 33). It was thought that women, if they were able to participate more in public life, would create a better society. It was this type of interest at the intersection of religion and feminist thought that led for instance to the prohibition movement in the United States.

Real work in the area of religion and feminism began with second-wave feminists. It was in the midst of consciousness-raising groups and the beginning of formal education within religious traditions that women awoke to the profound sexism within their traditions (Gross 1996: 39).

Feminists involved in religion, according to Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (1992), have generally offered critique of religious traditions, as we have mentioned, and also done constructive work within and outside of their traditions. In terms of critique for Christianity and Judaism, the use of male-only language for the divine affects the roles available for women within the religion and also deifies in a way maleness

and masculinity (Christ, Plaskow 1992: 3). Relatedly, another critique of religion by feminists has been the ways in which it supports the dualist thinking of the split between the mind or soul and the body, valuing the mind or soul above the body and material matter (Christ, Plaskow 1992: 5). Emphasising the mind or soul over the body has directly affected women, as women are in patriarchy more connected to the body. It has also limited their spiritual opportunities as much as male-only language has, as it has focused on their bodies, its impurities, and so on. In addition, this concern has been particularly important for ecofeminists interested in religion, as anti-material stances also affect how we treat the environment. For example, if we hope to go to heaven and this world is only a temporary stop on our way to eternal life, how we treat the earth matters considerably less. Feminists have critiqued the patriarchy within religious traditions, yet for those feminists working within religious traditions, all of them believe that their religions are, at their very cores, not patriarchal. In other words, there can be a Christianity free of its patriarchal trappings, a Judaism, a Buddhism, etc., emancipated from the masculinity-centring androcentrism.

Some feminists have found traditional religions so patriarchal that they have left established religion altogether (Christ, Plaskow 1992: 10) and created the Goddess Movement (often called feminist spirituality). This spiritual tradition, drawing on some tenets of Wicca, reclaims women as witches and advocates spiritual connection with Goddess. It grounds its spirituality in nature, the seasons and cycles of life highlighting those of women. It is unabashedly this-worldly centred and works to empower women (and in some versions men) to reclaim their spiritual selves, their bodies, and their connection to the world around them. According to Carol P. Christ, one of the main leaders of the Goddess movement, women need Goddess for four reasons: to strengthen bonds with other women; to express their wills; to be empowered as females; and to love their bodies again (Christ 1992: 276). The ancient Goddess cult may thus find and is finding its revitalisation in the modern era.

In this editors' introduction, we offer the reader a brief glimpse into a diverse field of research, hope to provide greater access to the subject area (and not just in the Czech context), and wish to inspire further reflections on the analytical potential of gender for research within religion and spirituality.

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