

3. Fatima Mernissi in Bosnia: azioni di genere, religiose e politiche nel contesto della Bosnia-Erzegovina?

a cura di Debora Spini

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This section revolves around the essay *The Unearthing of Islamic feminism in Bosnia Herzegovina*; the author, Zilka Spahić Šiljak, retraces how powerfully the work of Fatima Mernissi impacted her *Bildung* as a Muslim believer, a feminist and a scholar, in such a special context such as Bosnia Herzegovina at the turn of the century. With a combination of personal warmth and intellectual rigor, Spahić Šiljak shows how empowering *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* was for Muslim women in Bosnia Herzegovina, who would otherwise feel alienated by Western feminism. This section places her essay in dialogue with two Italian voices, representing distinctive disciplinary fields: Margherita Picchi is an expert in Islamic theology, with a special focus on feminism, whilst Giovanni Scotto's interests focus on theories of conflicts as well as on peace-building and mediation in international and domestic conflicts. Each of them interacts with Spahić Šiljak's paper according to a distinctive perspective; yet, as it will be further discussed below, all three converge on some broad themes. Scotto provides us with a wide-ranging fresco of Muslim women's agency in the framework of a unique historical experience, which he reconstructs through different phases, from Yugoslav nation building to the explosion of «ethnic» conflict. Scotto highlights how religion provided a compelling motivation for political and civil society engagement, shedding light on the tragic predicament of women victims of war violence. Scotto also provides a detailed analysis of the various manifestation of Islamic feminist activism in present day Bosnia Herzegovina. Margherita Picchi's essay dissects the complex imbrications of religion, gender, and race within the South African context, as manifested by the «gender Jihad» movement. Picchi also illustrates the importance of Mernissi's work in constructing an intersectional framework reconnecting anti-Apartheid, feminist and Islamic activism.

Although seemingly distant, these essays share some deep-set concerns. Besides the intrinsic importance of the topics discussed, they are also relevant in light of wider debates currently taking place not only in the international Academia, but also in many public spheres around the world. The

pages that follow aim at highlighting a few common lines of reflection, so as to stress the importance of this interdisciplinary intellectual dialogue. In particular, the authors' essays will be reconsidered in view of the nexus between religion and culture and between feminism and secularism, in the conviction that a thorough work of clarification on those conceptual couples may contribute to the quest of genuinely pluralistic public spheres, where women's individuality and autonomy may fully bloom.

1. Religion, culture, and pluralism

The nexus connecting culture and religion is quite central for each of these papers, even when not explicitly mentioned; equally important is the need to deconstruct and problematize both terms. This theme is extremely relevant in view of an even broader one: the possible configuration of political communities in a global context which have, by now, become irretrievably pluralistic. To speak in very simple terms, the authors provide important element to reconsider in a different light the debates about «multiculturalism». The essays presented in this section help clarify and disentangle some impasses concerning culture, religion and individual selfhood which can be found at the heart of many current political conflicts, as they shed light on a series of assumptions that often distort the focus of the debate. Multiculturalism is often indicted of privileging group rights over individual rights, thus curtailing effective personal freedom and autonomy. In turn, this view uncritically presupposes the identification of culture and religion. As observed by Benhabib, the widespread assumption that each human group «has» some kind of «culture» and that the boundaries between these groups and the contours of their cultures are specifiable and relatively «easy to depict» rests on four faulty epistemic premises:

«1) that cultures are clearly delineable wholes; 2) that cultures are congruent with population groups and that a noncontroversial description of the culture of a human group is possible; and 3) that even if cultures and groups do not stand in one-to-one correspondence, even if there is more than one culture within a human group and more than one group that may possess the same cultural traits, this poses no important problems for politics or policy»¹.

Another important observation, made by Ann Philips, integrates Benhabib's list. In many cases, the Western glance considers the capacity for in-

¹ S. Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture. Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press 2002, pp. 4-5.

dividual autonomy is depicted as its exclusive property, whilst all other identities are trapped within the cage of «cultural traditions»².

In the Western-centered, colonial glance «religion» and «culture» often overlap to the point of conflating. The identification of culture with religion does not only reify the first, but ignores how even the latter is loaded with many assumptions. An innovative trend within the field of religious studies goes as far as advocating a «Copernican turn» so as to deconstruct religion as a floating or even empty signifier, as in Laclau's terminology³. However, many glitches become apparent to an even less radically critical glance. Evidently, the notion of «religion» is molded by a Western-centered point of view, based upon the Jewish Christian tradition or, at best, on the Abrahamic model⁴, hardly capable of making sense of a wide range of beliefs and practices which do not share the same root. Most importantly, religious practices and beliefs are also part of historical flows, and are thus shaped by a number of contamination and hybridization processes.

The epistemic fallacies that foreclose the complexity of culture, religion and of their nexus constitute on the one hand the first step towards cultural racism⁵, and on the other provide the basis for a shallow form of multiculturalism and identity politics, where different collectivities simply co-habit the same public space without any kind of dialogical interaction. In the first case, «culture» and/ or «religion» replace biology as the criterion to ascribe to groups or individuals a cluster of eternal and immutable marking features which are, needless to say, usually derogatory. In the second, the distorted assumption generates political choices that essentially reinforce discrimination and privilege among communities, whilst failing to address injustices within communities – every reference to gender is evidently intentional. The reified, naturalized view of collective identity has evident repercussions also on the conceptualization of individual agency. A view of culture that does not admit of any transfor-

² A. Phillips, *Multiculturalism without Culture*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 32.

³ For a good summary of the main debates see M. Bergunder, *What is Religion? The Unexplained Subject Matter of Religious Studies*, in «Method & Theory in the Study of Religion», 26, 2014, 3 pp. 246-286.

⁴ R. King, *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies* New York, Columbia University Press, 2017.

⁵ The expression originated in the framework of French debate on immigration; see É. Balibar, *Is there a Neo-Racism*, in É. Balibar - E. Wallerstein (eds.), *Race Class Nation. Ambiguous Identities*, London, Verso, 1991, pp, 17-28.

mation or internal pluralism deprives individual of the capacity to enact creative and innovative transactions and negotiations within their own culture, especially if the capacity for individual autonomy is conceived as an exclusively Western heritage.

Islam is a showcase of all these confluences, as it is most typically represented as a sort of monolith, regardless of any form of national, linguistic, historical difference. The faulty epistemology, to use Benhabib's language, of the reification of culture and religion is a major component of the narrative of the clash of civilizations, which presented Islam as the enemy of Western civilization, as well as the many manifestations of Islamophobia⁶. The essays gathered in this section compose a very different scenario, as they all point out how religious, cultural, and gender dimensions intertwine in creating personal and collective identities. Scotto and Spahić Šiljak remind us of the uniqueness of Bosnian Islam; this memento sounds all the more dramatically relevant in light of the current debates the presence of Islam within the European borders. The heritage of Bosnian Islam – so cruelly squandered – denies the purported incompatibility between Muslim faith and European identity, and demonstrates that «religion» does not immediately identify in a «culture». Equally important is Picchi's account of the specificity of South African Islam, defined by the crossroad of so many lines of color, ethnicity, and power.

The authors are also reconstructing itineraries of self-awareness and empowerment undertaken by women within their own community of faith, a most interesting example of how transformative critical practices can develop within communities and groups through the re-interpretation of norms and values. This interesting experience resonates with the important philosophical debate on the nature and scope of immanent critique⁷, whilst echoing Charles Taylor's view of construction of individual identity as an essentially dialogical process, where the self develops through a series of negotiations and interactions with others⁸. In this normative horizon, the matter at stake is not the protection of «cultures», as much as the creation of a pluralist society providing the necessary conditions for a full flourishing of individuality.

⁶ For basic definition of Islamophobia, see T. Modood, *Islamophobia and Normative Sociology*, in «Journal of the British Academy», 8, 2020, pp. 29-49.

⁷ For an exhaustive summary of the debate see M. Solinas, *On the Forms of Immanent Critique*, in M. Dantini - D. Spini (eds.), *La parola, le pratiche, la cittadinanza - The Word, the Practices, the Citizenship*, Roma, Arshake, 2015, pp. 98-106.

⁸ C. Taylor, *The Politics of Recognition*, in A. Gutman (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 25-73.

2. Feminism, religion, secularism

The three essays here collected relate with important debates taking place within the field of feminist theory as well as in that of social and political theory at large, as they engage with the relationship between feminism and religion⁹, a nexus that has not been sufficiently explored, as well as on secularism and feminism. Probably, the very wording «feminism and religion» is not extremely helpful, as it is evidently over-simplifying. Just as the term «religion» applies to many diverse families of theological and ethical beliefs, ritual and social practices, «feminism» is an even more floating signifier, as it does not refer to any well-defined ideology, but rather indicates a wide range of distinct, and sometimes conflicting, theoretical and political practices. Continuing *faute de mieux* to use this terminology, it is almost superfluous to recall that the relationship between feminism – at the very least, Western feminism – and religion has been far from easy, and *pour cause*. It can hardly be disputed that most religious communities, institutions, and actors have contributed to the affirmation and strengthening of patriarchy, and that Abrahamic religions are surely no exception.

A well-established feminist tradition, therefore, welcomed secularization and considered secularism¹⁰ as the best ally for women liberation¹¹; a conviction that seems to be confirmed, rather than disproved, by the contemporary scenario, whose morphology prompted the diagnosis of a «Great Regression»¹², whose primary target are indeed women. Horrific events unfolding everywhere in the world show how women's rights are the first victims of religious fundamentalisms of various kinds. The Western world as well is somehow affected by this regressive trend. From many member states of the European Union and the United States, religion has been more and more frequently invoked as a ground to curtail women's right and freedom. As in the case of the dyad culture/religion, a few propaedeutic observations about the nexus between women freedom and secularization/secularism may not be superfluous. Evidently,

⁹ Giorgi provides an excellent summary of current debates: A. Giorgi, *Gender, Religion, and Political Agency. Mapping the Field*, «Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais», 2016, 110, pp. 51-72.

¹⁰ Summarizing the debate on secularization and secularism goes well beyond the scope of the present contribution; for references, see at least J. Casanova, *The Secular and Secularisms*, in «Social Research: An International Quarterly», 76, 2009, 4, pp. 1049-1066.

¹¹ R. Braidotti, *In Spite of the Times. The Post Secular Turn in Feminism*, in «Theory, Culture & Society» 25, 2008,6, pp. 1-24.

¹² H. Geiselberger, *The Great Regression*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.

this nexus is profoundly affected by the current debates which challenge both categories of secularization and secularism from many sides, so as to justify the growing appeal of the vocabulary of a «post-secular» paradigm. The history and experiences analyzed by Spahić Šiljak, Picchi, and Scotto also constitute a strong reminder of the need to include the gender dimension within all kind of reflections about the scope and shape of a post secular public space.

The trust in the liberating power of secularism needs to be reconsidered in the wider framework of the contradictions determining the place of women within modernity. This preparatory work permits to throw light on some well-known impasses first of all within the field of feminist debates¹³. Given the premises that religion is simply antithetic to modernity, and that the latter is invariably and absolutely true to its promises, the nexus between religion and women's freedom could only result in a zero-sum game «as if the arrival of secularism had solved the problem of sexual difference in history»¹⁴. The thesis of such a direct correspondence between secularization and women's liberation, and of the strong alliance between secularism and feminism, has been radically questioned within the general framework of the critique to the dominating paradigms of secularization and secularism¹⁵. In the case of the matter at hand two more critical perspectives need to be summoned.

Feminist scholarship has reconstructed how inclusion of women into the promises of modernity – primarily that of the affirmation of individuality and individual autonomy – was far from being just «a matter of time». Throughout Western modernity, women were represented as incapable of rational self-mastery and mostly identified with the magmatic dimension of passions¹⁶. The progressive distinction between a private and a public realm typical of Western liberal states also resulted in the confinement of women within the sphere of domesticity and their exclusion from the public space¹⁷. More generally, it is evident how women's condi-

¹³ L. Cady - T. Fessenden (eds.), *Religion, the Secular and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013.

¹⁴ J. W. Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, Durham NC, Duke University Press, 2012, p. 92.

¹⁵ K. Aune - M. Lövenheim - A. Giorgi - T. Toldy, *Is Secularism Bad for Women? – La Laïcité nuit-elle aux femmes?*, in «Social Compass», 64, 2017, 4, pp. 449-480.

¹⁶ This aspect has been masterfully explored by Elena Pulcini; see at least her *Il potere di unire. Femminile, desiderio, cura*. Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2003.

¹⁷ Scott especially highlights the division public / private: «The discursive assignment of women and religion to the private sphere was not – in the first articulations of the secular ideal – about the regu-

tion of newcomers – in Arendtian terms, *parvenus* – of modernity reflects upon the itinerary of secularization. In this perspective, women are ‘still’ religious as they are not yet touched by the progress of modernity.

The dyads gender/secularization, religion/feminism can also be reconsidered from another point of observation, that of the post and de-colonial critique¹⁸, as the optimistic view of the effects of secularism on gender relationships corresponds to a view of secularization as a necessary component of an unstoppable march of modernity from a center – the West – to the periphery. The post or decolonial perspective has brought to light the deep bond connecting this version of secularization with colonial temporality, and has demonstrated how the couple secularism/secularization has been used as an important element in the many forced processes of modernization that punctuate the history of colonialism. The two critical perspectives end up merging, as the image of non-Western societies as «not yet» rational and «still» religious corresponds to colonial construction of the «Third World Woman», awaiting to be saved and liberated by the colonizers¹⁹.

These observations apply to a major degree to Muslim women, for the reasons briefly sketched above. As Mohanty has brilliantly demonstrated, the colonial heritage persists among Western feminists, making them obstinately blind to all kind of differences and unresponsive to strategies and practices which do not replicate the Western model²⁰. The three essays here presented call for a more inclusive approach, acknowledging different itineraries to personal autonomy and agency, instead of discarding religious identity as a sort of childhood disease.

The colonial original flaw makes feminism an easy target of mechanism of appropriation by political forces who have little or no genuine con-

lation by religion of female sexuality. Rather, feminine religiosity was seen as a force that threatened to disrupt or undermine the rational pursuits that constitute politics; like feminine sexuality, it was excessive, trans-gressive, and dangerous» (J. W. Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, pp. 97-98). According to Scott, the privatization of religion has as a side effect to make the Church concentrate in sexuality.

¹⁸ On this particular debate see at least N. Maldonado-Torres, *Secularism and Religion in the Modern/Colonial World-System: From Secular Postcoloniality to Postsecular Transmodernity* in C. A. Jáuregui - M. L. Moraña - E. Dussel, (eds.), *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the PostColonial Debate*, Durham NC, Duke University Press, 2008.

¹⁹ G. Spivak, *Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism*, in «Critical Inquiry», 12, 1985, 1, pp. 243-261.

²⁰ C. Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, in «Boundary 2», 12, 1984, 3, pp. 333-358.

cern for women's freedom. Many examples show how the manipulation of feminist themes issues and claims in the framework of Islamophobic discourse constitutes a well-established technique of right-wing neo authoritarian political forces around the world, from Modi's India to Le Pen's Rassemblement National. Muslim women have been and continue to be used as pawns in all kind of political games, from debates on immigration to the always resurrecting myth of clash of civilization; no example could be more tragic than the recent events in Afghanistan. On the contrary, these essays confirm that women engaging in a feminist perspective within the Quranic tradition are a most inspiring example of original approaches to autonomy, at the same time contextual and exquisitely personal. Their theological and political reflection, their innovative interpretations of practices and norms, and most of all their intrinsic dialogic identities constitute a most necessary breeding ground of genuinely pluralistic public spheres. They also remind us how feminism, in all its multifarious avatars, needs to engage with women's religious agency, so as to avoid the danger of becoming the handmaid of political forces that have little or no concern for women's self-determination and autonomy.

3. An open agenda

As announced in the introductory paragraph, these essays focus on Islamic feminism in specific contexts, yet provide important elements for much broader conversations, to begin by the crucial theme of individual autonomy and moral and political agency.

More specifically, the contributions by Spahić Šiljiak, Picchi and Scotto indicate a series of necessary steps to realize genuinely pluralistic public spheres, a crucial requirement for the future of democratic public spaces. By recalling the specific history of Bosnia Herzegovina, or the specificity of Islam in South Africa, they help dismantle the reifying association of religion and culture, thus clearing the way for many future conversations. The emphasis on a dialogical and intersubjective conception of self, a sort of implicit *fil rouge* of these essays, also bears important consequences in the political and in the social field. Exploring how Muslim women in Bosnia and South Africa have creatively renegotiated individual and collective identities, working from within cultural, historical and spiritual traditions, the authors present us with a most promising example of transformative practices within and among communities, pointing to further possible applications of immanent critical paradigms. For the same reason, they provide most helpful tools defuse the manipulative identifi-

cations of feminism with «Western» values, which has such a paralyzing effect on women's struggle in many contexts.

161

To summarize, these essays challenge the uncritical association between secularism and women's empowerment, thus constituting a strong reminder of the need to include the gender dimension within all kind of reflections about the scope and shape of a post secular public space; an important task which is so far too often neglected.

