

Religious constructions of femininity – by Márcia Moser

This paper provides an insight into religious constructions of femininity in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. As a second step, by way of presenting some examples, I will shed light on their significance for the socio-political actions of religious institutions in Germany.

Before I address the subject, I would like to remark that I will use the term “*concepts* of femininity” as opposed to “*constructions* of femininity” since the aim here is to focus more on the content of the images of femininity and being a woman rather than the processes behind their creation.

1. ‘Gender’ is an important, religion-immanent category of order that helps to structure crucial areas and tasks of religious life. This also applies to the three so-called religions of the book – Judaism, Christianity and Islam.¹ In most cases, a certain hierarchy is attached to this category of order that makes “femininity” and “being a woman” subordinate and influences the social and religious life of Jewish, Christian and Muslim men and women by using clear-cut structures of gender difference:

In all three religions of the book, the social and religious role of a woman is “traditionally” reduced to her tasks as a wife and mother. Only in early and/or later Catholic Christianity has the ascetic way of leading a life of abstinence become a real alternative to marriage for women. In Judaism and Islam, there is an “obligation to marry” which - in contrast to the Christian concept of marriage - does not imply that a marriage is irresolvable.

Religious obligations focus on raising children and the domestic sphere. What is extremely important, for example, in Judaism, is the religious responsibility of women when it comes to complying with Jewish food rituals – *kashrut*. Women are only allowed to access synagogues and mosques separated from men. Furthermore, in Judaism, and partly also in Islam, there are restrictions regarding ritual impurity that, for example, is given during menstruation. In none of the three religions of the book do women have equal access to religious posts and offices. Christianity introduced the ordination of women in Protestant and old Catholic communities at the beginning of the 20th century; in liberal, progressive and conservative communities, the ordination of female rabbis became possible at the beginning of the 20th century. In Islam, women can function as prayer leaders for women; whether women shall be allowed to assume the office of an Imam is currently being discussed among Muslims or is already partly being practiced by progressive Muslims.² Where does the roughly outlined social subordination of women come from? Does it have religious origins?

Since the 1960s, feminist religious criticism has repeatedly attributed the social and religious subordination of women to the male concepts of God of the monotheistic religions. It is claimed that they legitimise male authority and divinise “being a man”³.

¹ The following overview is a summary the basis of which are the titles of the bibliography. Footnotes will only be given for the few concrete examples that can not be derived from the general titles indicated in the bibliography.

² *Judentum: Cf. Navè Levinson, Pnina; Eva und ihre Schwestern. Perspektiven einer jüdisch-feministischen Theologie.* Gütersloh, 1992. pp. 168-173. Islam cf.: *Zum Freitagsgebet* by Amina Wadud: http://www.muslimwakeup.com/events/archives/2005/03/friday_prayer_1.php.

On the debate: Azam, Hina; A critique of the argument for woman-led Friday prayers.

http://www.altmuslim.com/a/a/a/a_critique_of_the_argument_for_woman_led_friday_prayers/.

³ Cf. e.g.. Daly, Mary; *Jenseits von Gottvater, Sohn & Co.* Munich, 1986.

This hypothesis needs to be taken with a pinch of salt because, from the viewpoint of religious science - apart from the fact that many Jewish and Muslim men and women reject any gender-based concept of God - there is no one-fits-all answer to the question regarding the connection between worshipping a male- or female-connoted deity. However, it is possible to state the following:

“Femininity” is integrated in various ways into symbolic reflections of the God-Man-relationship: consequently, the community of Israel is represented as a bride or wife of God in various sections of the Tanach; in Islamic mysticism, the following equation was formulated: while special piety was characterised as “male”, cosmopolitanism was characterised as “female”; in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul equates religious-secular hierarchies with the gender hierarchy by saying: “*The head of every man is Christ and the head of the woman is the man and the head of Christ is God.*” Despite all differences of the above-mentioned examples one can say: while female aspects represent secular things and also the difference to God, the distance to God, “femininity” functions as a religious category of valuation and hierarchisation. In contrast to that, we find examples in Jewish and Islamic mysticism where God’s presence and/or the manifestations of deity have female connotations.

On the other hand, feminist concepts of God formulated alternative theologies that focused more on the female characteristics of deity and destabilised male and patriarchal concepts.⁴

The female figures of the Holy Scriptures, such as Judith and Esther in the Tanach or Mary and Magdalene in the New Testament (Mary is the only woman that is mentioned by name in the Qu’ran), especially in their later cultural and historical adaptations, appear as idealised or demonised typologies of femininity. And Eve and Lilith, the two characters that became Adam’s first women, triggered theological interpretation disputes about the representation of women and/or the female elements in Holy Scriptures that were (and are), for instance, linked to the question whether the subordination of women stems from the history of creation.⁵ One can find normative statements on “the woman” as a religious and social subject at some points in Jewish, Christian and Islamic scriptures - how the status of women is defined depends, however, on the corresponding reference framework: while, at some points, equality of men and women before God is announced, others give reasons for the subordination of women under men or the exclusion of women from religious posts, spaces and knowledge. Positive or rather idealised statements on women are normally connected to their role as wives and mothers.

Consequently, this role of women as wives and mothers seems to be a central element of traditional, religious concepts of femininity in all of the three religions of the book. It becomes clear that the gender-related, subordinated role of women is directly linked to their sexual role. In other words, the dual gender order has been formed in a hetero-normative community mainly to safeguard reproduction. The fact that this “safeguarding of reproduction” is extensively linked to the role and status of women becomes especially visible when looking at religious body concepts. In Christianity, they are connected to the platonic dualism of spirit and flesh which accounts for the

⁴ Cf. e.g. Mollenkott, Virginia R.; *Gott eine Frau? Vergessene Gottesbilder der Bibel*. Munich, 1985.

⁵ Cf. On the gender-political interpretation of the Creation story from a Christian perspective: Karle, Isolde; ‘*Da ist nicht Mann noch Frau...*’ *Theologie jenseits der Geschlechterdifferenz*. Gütersloh, 2006. pp. 201-227. From a Jewish perspective: Navè Levinson, pp. 13-17, 62-72. And from an Islamic perspective: Wadud, Amina; *Qur’an and Woman. Reading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective*. New York, 1999. pp. 15-29.

negative attitude towards bodyliness, sexuality and femininity. Judaism and Islam, however, do not know of similar negative understandings of “flesh” and sexuality between men and women. Instead, they have concepts of cultural impurity that are linked to physical signs of sexuality, such as semen or menstruation blood. Even though these signs are also relevant for the male body, women are considered to be more comprehensively included into the process of reproduction.

In Judaism and Islam, the marking of the body in its gender-related and sexual difference through clothing comprehensively affects both men and women, whereas a strong distinction needs to be made between cultural spaces and eras. In Judaism, headgear for women has been common practice ever since Antiquity; for men only since the Middle Ages. The veiling of women in Islam stems from a Qua’ran sura whose wording refers to both men and women, i.e. includes men in the same way. In Christianity, for instance, there is a Paulinic statement on the covering of women’s heads to show their awe vis-à-vis men.

The aforementioned concepts of femininity are geared to traditional understandings that can be mainly derived from normative scriptures and that, for instance, form the basis for conservative and “fundamentalist” positions; at this point I can only allude to the variety of feminist, gay-lesbian queers or liberal interventions⁶ in these areas. At the end of the day, the question regarding the topicality of these concepts of femininity can only be answered if one takes inner-religious differences, religious self-concepts and the concepts of religion of religious subjects into consideration.

2. In the following, I would like to give two concrete examples to shed light on the issue of the significance of religious concepts of femininity with regard to socio-political positions of religious institutions: these are (a) the debates about legal regulations on abortions and (b) wearing head scarves in public spaces. These examples illustrate how religious institutions have tried to exert social and political influence on issues that are relevant for gender policy or women’s rights.

a) The Catholic and Protestant Churches in Germany perceive themselves as “pro-life advocates”⁷. However, their attitudes towards abortions show that there are theological and practical differences. In its religious argumentations and statements on abortion the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) mainly refers to the Fifth Commandment: Thou shall not kill. This argumentation is based on the conviction that individual, human life emerges from the fusion of an egg cell and semen which shall enjoy the same protection as born life. Pregnancy conflict counselling services above all focus on helping a pregnant woman make the right decision taking her individual situation into account. Even though the overall aim is to foster a woman’s decision in favour of delivering the child, the guiding principle is: “Unborn life can only be protected together with the pregnant woman, not against her”⁸.

⁶ Cf. in addition to the mentioned authors (Daly, Karle, Mollenkott, Navè Levinson, Wadud) e.g., Kerstin Söderblom, Michael Brinkschröder, Rebecca Alpert and Daniel Boyarin.

⁷ Cf. The general statement of the Protestant and Catholic Churches in Germany of 1989: *Gott ist ein Freund des Lebens. Herausforderungen und Aufgaben beim Schutz des Lebens..* See: <http://www.ekd.de/EKD-Texte/44678.html>.

⁸ Barth, Hermann; *Fürsprecher des Lebens sein*. Speech held at the *Kirchenjuristentagung* (church lawyers meeting) in Eisenach in 2001, 13 June 2001. See: <http://www.ekd.de/vortraege/barth/6470.html>

The Catholic Church in its statements against abortions mainly refers to arguments based on the laws of nature that emphasise the reproductive character of sexuality which legitimises sexuality in the first place. The Pope's encyclical '*Humanae Vitae*' of 1968 prohibits abortion even if it is deemed necessary for health reasons. In 2000, the Catholic Church stopped sponsoring and offering German pregnancy conflict counselling services because they argued that issuing a counselling slip would virtually legalise abortions. Ever since, counselling work has been continued through associations like *Donum Vitae*; the clear focus of counselling is the protection of unborn life; counselling slips are issued, however.⁹

The positions of the churches on contraception again show the diverging religious argumentations regarding the attitude towards abortions and sexuality per se: while the Protestant Church in Germany advocates artificial contraception and emphasises the meaning of sexuality irrespective of its reproductive character, the Catholic Church distinguishes between permitted "natural" forms and prohibited, unnatural forms of contraception and justifies this again with the reproductive character of sexuality based on the laws of nature¹⁰.

b) In the following example, I will refer to statements made by the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD) and the Alevi Federation on the so-called headscarf judgment rendered by the Federal Constitutional Court on 24 September 2003.

In its position paper, the Central Council of Muslims in Germany formulated a basic attitude which is based on three different strands of arguments: the Central Council in its position paper advocates a liberal approach towards headscarves, i.e. especially the freedom *to wear* the headscarf. In the beginning, it is clearly stated that the statements are limited to the situation of Muslim women in Germany and presuppose the voluntary nature of wearing a headscarf. The Council explicitly criticises parents, for example, forcing their daughters to wear a headscarf since this duress disregards the direct relationship of a believing woman to God. There are three arguments given as reasons for this basic attitude of the paper: 1. the political argument: here, the Council appeals to the state's principle of neutrality (in the sense of free exercise of belief); 2. the socio-cultural argument: here, two aspects need to be taken into consideration: the public debate about the headscarf is characterised, on the one hand, as a cultural conflict between a non-Muslim, mostly German majority and a Muslim minority of mostly non-German origin; on the other hand, it is understood as a conflict between secular / anticlerical and religious positions; 3. the religious argument: wearing a headscarf is less perceived as an Islamic symbol of religious commitment, but rather as an important part of individual, religious duties of Muslim women. Here, the argument of individual, religious duties is to the fore; the paper argues that the headscarf is consequently not an expression of the subordination of women under their husbands but that women wear headscarves independent of their marital status. Wearing a headscarf – despite some references to (respected) exceptions – is understood

⁹ Encyclica of Pope Paul VI. on the right (legal?) order of the transmission of human life "Humanae vitae" 25. July 1968. See: http://stjosef.at/dokumente/humanae_vitae.htm ; Lehmann, Karl; *Pro: Lebensschutz*. In: Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt, No. 27/1999. See: <http://www.sonntagsblatt.de/artikel/1999/27/27-s1.htm>.

¹⁰ To learn about the position of EKD, please visit: <http://www.ekd.de/bevollmaechtigter/stellungnahmen/52400.html>. To learn about the Catholic position, see source Fn 20.

as a religious requirement of mutual relevance which is shared by a Muslim majority as well as by the four schools of law.¹¹

The Alevites state that they do not consider the headscarf a religious issue. In their statements, they support a headscarf ban in public spaces. They use two strands of arguments: 1. the religious argument: according to the Alevi statement, the headscarf does not constitute a Muslim religious substance, an Islamic universal application. In fact, they argue, a majority of Sunni women reject wearing a headscarf. By referring to Islamic legal doctrine, the Sharia (representative Buhari), that Alevites refuse to recognise, a religious image of women is discussed according to which an unveiled woman is potentially guilty of seduction;

2. the political argument: the Alevites have put up the clear demand to prohibit the wearing of headscarves in public spaces - they are afraid of losing influence on their children. Furthermore, the headscarf has become a symbol of inner-Islamic conflicts regarding the question of 'Who is a real Muslim?' and – in contrast to the approach of the Central Council of Muslims – they also focus on the free exercise of religion which they have not always been entitled to and whose safeguard they now expect from German politics.¹²

As these examples illustrate, it is possible only to a limited extent to reconstruct a direct impact of traditional, religious concepts of femininity on the socio- and gender-political activities of religious institutions. Merely the attitude of the Catholic Church on abortions can be directly ascribed to their firm, religious understanding of sexuality that specifically affects the realities of life for women. Though the Protestant Church in Germany shares the attitude against abortions, it uses a different line of argumentation and takes the specific position of women in the process of reproduction into account; in addition, it directly addresses the responsibility of men in this context. Direct references to the Lutheran teaching on marriage that restrictively negates the needs of women could not be found, which can probably be put down to the interventions of feminist theologies. The positions of the Central Council of Muslims as well as the Alevi Federation refer to the significance of the recipient to whom argumentations have to be adjusted. For both, religious arguments only play a minor role. One reason among others might be that it is presumed that they cannot be discussed with non-Muslims. The element of shame which plays a significant role for Muslim headscarf "advocates" is only marginally cited by the Central Council. This sheds light on other dimensions of the debate: the 'headscarf dispute' did not only trigger discussions about gender equity but was simultaneously affected by conflicts of cultural hegemony and the role of religion in a 'secular' society.

Interestingly, I haven't yet found an example which illustrates a similar conflict or debate between Jewish associations and non-religious institutions on a gender-political topic. In the press releases of the Central Council of Jews of the last five years, I merely found a brief comment on the discussion about statements made by the popu-

¹¹ Position paper of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD) on the headscarf debate of 23.10.2003. See: <http://www.islam.de/2652.php> ;

¹² Letter of the Commissioner for Education of the Alevi Community in Germany, Ismail Kaplan, to Ole Schmidt, Chairman of the Educational Committee of the Regional Parliament of Schleswig-Holstein of 21.04.2004. Private source. Kaplan, Ismail; 2 July: *Name eines Massakers auf Aleviten. Provokationslüge statt Verantwortungsübernahme*. In: Stimme der Aleviten, No. 85, 2005.

lar German TV presenter, Eva Herman.¹³ With the much smaller *Union of Progressive Jews in Germany*, however, gender-political positions constitute the basis of their programme; they, however, refer to inner-Jewish debates like the ordination of women or the equal integration of women into church service. 'Gender' might be an issue of religious debates among Jews in Germany but hardly ever an issue discussed between Jewish associations and e.g. state institutions, as was the case with the two aforementioned examples. I am definitely not able to exhaustively explain this issue here and now and am therefore grateful for any corrective advice. However, one can say at this point that the Jewish associations in Germany do not feel compelled to clearly position themselves in the gender-political debate as is the case with the Christian churches or Muslim associations.

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¹³ See: <http://www.zentralratjuden.de/de/article/1442.html>

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