

Gender and Orthodoxy (Series)

A decolonial critique of western feminist hermeneutics in theology/religious studies
in relation to Orthodox communities



By Dr. Romina Istratii

In this series, Dr Istratii presents the evolution of Western feminist theory of gender, the dangers that exist when Western theories extend to other societies without giving attention to the historical conditions that triggered and informed their development and addresses some of the key issues raised by feminist philosophers in reference to Orthodox theology and from the point of view of the Orthodox phronema of the Holy Fathers and Mothers of the Orthodox Church.

The series began with a brief genealogical analysis of the concept of 'gender' in Western feminist thought to question the human metaphysics it has assumed under the influence of Western philosophy and scientific thought and history (see the [analysis](#) in Greek). The second essay in the series examines the validity of Western feminist hermeneutics and gender-sensitive approaches in theology/religious studies in reference to Orthodox traditions and points to the need for a decolonial method embedded in the historicity and exegetical tradition of the religious community in question each time. The report follows such a method to better understand negative or harmful attitudes towards women associated with domestic violence in Orthodox societies and to suggest how they can be addressed with the help of Orthodox theology. The essay is based extensively on the author's peer-reviewed article ["Beyond a feminist' hermeneutics of suspicion': Reading St John Chrysostom's commentaries on man-woman relations, marriage and conjugal abuse through the Orthodox phronema."](#)

Western feminist hermeneutics in theology /religious studies and the need for decolonisation

The incorporation of gender-sensitivity in theology/religion(s) studies has been premised generally on the belief that women within western Christian experience were historically marginalised and suppressed in a male-dominated society and biblical scholarship, which begot the need to rediscover these female voices and experiences and to reformulate theologies in ways that aligned better with contemporary feminist ideals. For instance, Darlene Juschka in *Feminism in the Study of Religion: A Reader* explains that the focus of feminist scholars in theology and religious studies has been to reinterpret sacred texts so as to address biases in what is considered male- and elite-dominated scholarship.^[1] Methodological approaches in this discipline have therefore placed emphasis on looking at the historical and societal context in which these traditions developed so as to understand what might have fostered their androcentric tendencies and to provide alternative 'readings' of religious histories and experiences. They have been shaped by the influential works of seminal feminist writers who criticised (western) Christian traditions from different angles, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), Mary Daly (1928-2010), Rosemary Radford Ruether (1936-) and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1938-).

Especially influential has been Fiorenza's feminist exegetical approach premised on a 'hermeneutics of suspicion.' In her book *Bread not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza presented a systematic approach toward a feminist biblical exegetical approach or what she called 'feminist evaluative hermeneutics.'^[2] Fiorenza proposed a paradigm shift from understanding the bible as archetypal myth to conceiving it as a historical prototype. As this historical context was androcentric and biased toward women, a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' was needed to detect the ideological underpinnings and distortions. This critical reading needed to be combined with a 'hermeneutics of remembrance', a reconstruction of women's

history from the perspective of the oppressed. Importantly, in proposing a more critical engagement with biblical scholarship, she did not assume feminist authority over the Bible or truth.

While this paradigmatic approach has made important contributions within western theological/religious studies, it can become problematic when it is monolithically transposed cross-culturally. Using such an analytical prism, many (but not all) prominent feminist scholars in gender and theology/religion(s) studies have already displayed essentialising tendencies that present all 'Christian theology' as patriarchal, sexist or that attribute to it other essentialist characterisations. For example, in the seminal volume *Feminism in the Study of Religion* Darlene Juschka cited Mary Daly's critical writings against patriarchal Christianity and suggested that the latter was inherently androcentric without nuancing this statement in view of cross-cultural particularities.^[3] Fiorenza herself, although careful not to "reify texts and traditions as oppressive or as emancipatory" extended her critique cross-culturally, saying that "in most societies and religions wo/men have been excluded from the authoritative traditions and classic texts not just by historical accident but by laws and custom."^[4] Similar tendencies are found in Rosemary Ruether's work. While she reported that her analysis had incorporated Orthodox Christianity, she stated uniformly that "[a]ll of these traditions are sexist" without providing anywhere a theologically-informed and historico-culturally embedded analysis of Orthodox Christianity.^[5]

The problem is found in the fact that western feminist scholars have tended to presuppose a feminist hermeneutics in their study of 'other' religious traditions, especially those of a Christian theology. Their rationale seems to be that since women were historically demeaned in most societies, sexism must have also defined the attitudes and discourses of male theologians in all religious traditions. Thus, scholars who have studied eastern traditions from a gender-sensitive prism have produced representations that are theologically inaccurate. Indicatively, we can take a closer look at Kari Elisabeth Børresen's article "Gender, Religion and Human Rights in Europe."^[6] In her analysis, Børresen took a comparative approach in appraising world "religions" and reached some general conclusions, such as that "Christian theology" is "redemptive", "sexophobic" and accessible to scientific analysis. While such characterisations may apply to some theological traditions, it is important to recognise that there is no single or monolithic "Christian theology" *per se* but many historical, context-specific and embodied traditions whose diversity cannot be captured by a singly umbrella term.

Additionally, the above three characterisations are unreflective of the Orthodox tradition and cosmology. The Eastern Orthodox aim at human edification and 'perfection' through the establishment of a personal relationship to God and the embodiment of God's commandments in everyday living. The word 'therapy' describes better the objective of the soteriological faith and is often used in the local vernaculars. Moreover, in this tradition many adherents become monks and nuns after having lived a full physical life. It is not a *phobia* of sex that makes ascetics particularly aversive to the topic, but a concern that such thoughts might trigger desires and temptations that can distance them from the path of continence and purity they have decided to follow. Moreover, theology and scientific analysis are not placed on the same axis. As opposed to the historical Roman Catholic tradition that placed emphasis on the intellect as the centre of theological activity, Orthodox theology has always been attributed to the *nous*^[7], with the latter informing/being informed by, but not dictating, intellectual activity.

Mainstreamed feminist paradigms seem to be blind to these specificities and ultimately result in a 'reading' of Eastern Orthodox or other non-western (so-called, oriental) Christianities out of the knowledge system that has defined the meanings of their teachings. Essentially, the fundamental limitation of feminist paradigms in theology/religion(s) studies is that these are too conditioned to the western cosmological and sociological contexts that begot them in the first place, which limits their applicability and relevance elsewhere. For example, the hermeneutics developed by Fiorenza were motivated by her positionality as an academic in the United States with a German background who had been exposed to a certain genealogy of biblical exegetical traditions.^[8] It is this 'epistemological situatedness' of both hermeneutics and theorist that limits considerably the relevance that such exegetical presuppositions and tools can have in non-western theological systems,^[9] which are expected to have followed distinct historical trajectories and to have developed unique exegetical approaches.

It is important to stress that religious traditions, Christian or not, develop in context-specific historical conditions, which define what is understood as theology and main exegetical traditions within each faith community. Orthodoxy pertains to the upright (ortho-) faith or belief (*doxa*) which was revealed to the disciples of Christ at Pentecost. Part of this faith has been preserved in written form through the Holy Scriptures. However, in the Orthodox tradition the unwritten Holy Tradition, which was perpetuated through the life of the Church and embodied in the experience of the saints – known and unknown – has been equally important and complementary to the written revelations. In the Orthodox Church, the faithful aim at uninterrupted communion with God to achieve likeness with God and the salvation of their soul. They do so by participating in the Sacraments and living a life of Orthodox *ascesis*, prayer and giving. Following Saint Maximos the Confessor, this therapeutic pathway has been described as purification (*catharsis*), enlightenment and deification (*theosis*)^[10],^[11] As the Orthodox believer undergoes purification, she begins to be enlightened and to obtain insight into divine mysteries. This awakening of the *nous* (*theoptia*) to the grace and wisdom of God is what the Orthodox tradition has identified with noetic theology. In other words, theology in this tradition has not been predicated on reason or intellect, which has been equated to an androcentric perspective within many western feminist critiques, but rather on the enlightenment of the *nous*.

The implication is that women had no reasons to be excluded from knowing and expressing Orthodox theology. In fact, women were as much involved in the preservation and embodiment of apostolic teachings as were men. Readers should not be led to believe that theology was gender-exclusive on the premise that the actual articulation of Orthodox teachings was dominated by males, which has ecclesiastical and socio-cultural explanations. This is partially explained by the fact that males already held more prominence in the early societies and women were generally dedicated to the life of the household and child-rearing. In addition, in the Orthodox tradition only men have been able to serve in the role of priests, providing them with an additional platform for teaching others. However, it should be noted that while the Orthodox Church has historically preserved the priestly order for men, this has been explained in reference to theological reasons that do not suggest an ontological male superiority, as some western feminist writers have thought to be the case within western biblical traditions. It is understood that the priestly order follows Christ (or the 'New Adam') who is considered the Archpriest of the Church. Akin to this, the designation 'Father' is not an effort to ascribe anthropomorphic/androgenic qualities to God, as interpreted within some western feminist scholarship, but rather to denote that He alone is the Cause in the Trinity.



There is no question that the Orthodox Church has historically venerated both female and male prophets and saints, with the Virgin Mary being considered the Holiest of all the Saints. In addition, there have been instances where female saints have explicated divine mysteries to male saints with extraordinary theological clarity, and have been considered authoritative to settle doctrinal Church positions among male clergies. The former is exemplified in the dialogue that bedridden Saint Macrina had with her brother Saint Gregory of Nyssa on the state of the soul which enforced his steadiness in the faith. Notably, Saint Gregory of Nyssa considered Saint Macrina his 'teacher.' The latter was exemplified at the fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon in Bithynia (AD 451) when the final decision about Christology was made by a miracle of the deceased local Saint Euthemia.

Under the influence of the same feminist hermeneutics, Saint Paul and Saint John Chrysostom have been frequently described as misogynists ('haters of women').^[12] This logic would fail to explain however 'readings' of Saint Paul and Chrysostom that have promoted the visibility and dignity of females as have been typical in the Orthodox tradition. In fact, Saint Paul's teachings are understood to have given prominence to women in the Church and to have redefined conventional understandings of male headship in marriage in terms of altruistic love. Especially the epistles of Saint Paul to Philemon, Romans and Philippians which include references to female figures (Apphia, Phoebe, Priscilla, Tryphena and Tryphosa, Persis, Euodia and Syntyche) showcase that female activity in disseminating and strengthening the early Church was equally valued to male activity, so much so that their names were mentioned by the apostle at the beginning of his addresses, often preceding the names of men. Chrysostom's teachings on gender relations, marriage and domestic violence have been analysed elsewhere thoroughly and will not be repeated here, but there should be no doubt that Chrysostom was genuinely concerned about and advocated for the rights of women in marriage and beyond.^[13]

In conclusion, it is imperative to recognise that any 'readings' of Christian theology through the prism of western/feminist hermeneutics remains disproportionately informed by western forms of Christianity and western women's societal experiences. As such, it succumbs to the same colonial epistemological tendencies that defined early (and strands of later) feminist scholarship.

^[14] Within gender and religious studies a decolonial approach that examines religious traditions through an indigenous theological, doctrinal, hermeneutical and sociological prism as a means to understanding gender issues and redressing potential inequalities and injustices from 'within' seems to be essential.

Understanding gender issues within Orthodox societies

This approach is especially vital in regards to Orthodox societies due to the particular nature of this tradition. The Orthodox Church not only has a theology that is fundamentally different than western Christianities, but historically acted with a missionary spirit, engaging cautiously with pre-existing social and political systems with the aim to transcend them and to consolidate the Christian message among new converts. In some cases, the early Church was accommodating if it was felt that local systems did not hinder the Christian message to develop, or if a non-confrontation approach was necessary to avoid exacerbating risks for the new converts. This tactic is best exemplified in the instance where Saint Paul used the Greek inscription of worship on the monument dedicated 'To An Unknown God' in order to introduce to the Athenians the Christian message of salvation (Acts 17:23).

Consequently, pre-existing social systems did not entirely disappear and vestiges carried into the new Christian communities. Church Fathers who lived in subsequent eras were not oblivious to these customary or normative understandings and attitudes that persisted and condemned them openly, such as when Chrysostom spoke against slavery among his audiences, or other instances. It is worth citing also Gregory the Theologian who, referring to the asymmetrical law that stipulated punishment for an adulterous woman but no punishment for an adulterous man, said characteristically:

Τι δῆποτε γὰρ τὸ μὲν θῆλυ ἐκόλασαν, τὸ δὲ ἄρρεν ἐπέτρεψαν; Καὶ γυνή μὲν κακῶς βουλευσαμένη περὶ κοίτην ἀνδρός μοιχάται καὶ πικρά ἐντεῦθεν τὰ τῶν νόμων ἐπιτίμια, ἀνὴρ δὲ καταπορνεύων γυναικὸς ἀνεύθυνος; Οὐ δέχομαι ταύτην τὴν νομοθεσίαν, οὐκ ἐπαινώ τὴν συνήθειαν. Ἄνδρες ἦσαν οἱ νομοθετοῦντες, διὰ τοῦτο κατὰ γυναικῶν ἡ νομοθεσία.

For what reason did they punish the woman, but made allowance for the man? And while the woman who insults the spousal bed commits adultery the law punishes her with heavy sentences, the man who fornicates is not accountable to the woman? I do not accept this legislation and I do not praise this custom. Men were the legislators, and it is for this that the legislation turns again women.^[15]

Such a history-based and context-sensitive approach is pertinent also to subsequent communities of Orthodox Christians and the national Churches that eventually emerged. While the Orthodox Church is a single ecclesiastical body, demarcations into national Churches occurred with the development of national consciousness and as a result of historical events. Many of these Churches extend beyond their national boundaries as a result of missionary activity, displacements and immigration. Socio-cultural, economic and political realities specific to the histories of what have been traditionally Orthodox societies mediated both the ways

in which theology was pronounced by Church hierarchies or communicated through the clergy and the extent to which the faithful could embody the Orthodox worldview in everyday life. For example, regarding the historically Russian Orthodox populations, Elisabeth Gassin observed:

Although these cultures may be considered traditionally Orthodox, given the modern history of these lands—which includes domination by Islamic and Communist forces that often did not allow the Church to educate its children fully—one may question how deeply an Orthodox ethos has penetrated such societies. ^[16]

It should be recognised also that the traditional prominence of the Orthodox Church in these societies deemed religious discourse susceptible to appropriation by different parties for political, socio-cultural and other vested interests, contributing to further distortions. However, such discursive deployments need to be differentiated from the historical experience-based Orthodox *phronema* (conscience) which the Church Fathers and Mothers and saints consistently embodied and conveyed in their works, despite each having lived in different eras and societal conditions. The folklore vernacular experience of Orthodox communities should not be confounded with this Orthodox *phronema* or the formal teachings of the Church at any one time, despite these being intertwined in complex ways. While the faithful will tend to have a basic understanding of Orthodox dogmatic tenets, they will not always have a theology-informed understanding of their faith, which will depend on how they have been socialised within the faith and their personal relationship to God (their spiritual journey).

This is especially crucial to recognise when trying to understand pernicious attitudes towards women, girls or marriage in Orthodox societies (the issue of homosexuality and attitudes towards it will be discussed in the next essay of the series). Such attitudes can include tendencies to emphasise honour that can lead men to become controlling or abusive with females, exceeding preoccupation with women's chastity but not men's, or expectations that women should fulfil household works and meet the needs of the husband at all times by emphasising male authority. ^[17] Such attitudes have been associated with various forms of conjugal violence in Orthodox societies. ^[18] These attitudes could emanate from a lack of familiarity with Orthodox theology or an extreme emphasis on aspects of life that appear to be valued also within the faith (such as marriage or the family).

While these attitudes do not reflect the Orthodox *phronema* of the saints, they can be unwittingly enforced through the discourses of Church hierarchies and clergy, who do not realise the impact that their speech may have on existing perceptions and attitudes in Orthodox societies, such as when clergy emphasize the maintenance of the marital bond without stressing at the same time that this bond presupposes mutual sacrifices on the part of the spouses, as Chrysostom explained. As I demonstrate extensively in my study of domestic violence in the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahādo* community, in societies where the woman is already obliged to obey the man or never to confront him openly, an emphasis on the marital bond without simultaneously stressing the responsibilities of love and sacrifice that husbands have towards wives can worsen the situation of women. ^[19] The implication of these complex dynamics in combination with the centrality that religious discourse has in the vernacular experience of faithful communities is that Orthodox theology can make a significant contribution to tackling distorted ideas, norms or practices among Orthodox populations when it is employed with discernment by the clergy.

In conclusion, it should be underlined that the author of this article is not generally against feminist hermeneutics or critiques, which should lead the Orthodox, laity and clergy alike, to a serious introspection and evaluation of inequalities and issues concerning women within their own communities. As we have seen, domestic violence is widespread in Orthodox societies too, and although the aetiology of the phenomenon is significantly more complex than feminist theory accounts for, ^[20] the problem is also partially associated with some negative attitudes toward women and the family. What I find problematic about these theoretical and analytical frameworks is that despite their origins in Western historical and social contexts, such methods are adopted by writers without thorough knowledge of non-western traditions who assume them to be relevant to non-Western traditions and communities solely because of their feminist aspirations. Feminist or not, this attitude in western academic knowledge production appears to continue colonial legacies in scholarship and needs to be problematized openly.

^[1] Darlene Juschka, *Feminism in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (Continuum, 2001).

^[2] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Beacon Press, 1984).

^[3] Juschka, *Feminism in the Study of Religion*, 163.

^[4] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Method in Women's Studies in Religion: A Critical Feminist Hermeneutics", 224 and 226.

^[5] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 22.

^[6] Kari Elisabeth Børresen "Gender, Religion and Human Rights in Europe" in *Pieties and Gender*, ed. L. Sjørup and H. R. Christensen (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2009), 55-64.

^[7] 'νοῦς'; might be thought of as the rational core of the human soul, as differentiated from the intellect. It has also been called the 'eye of the soul.'

^[8] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Biblical Interpretation and Critical Commitment," *Studia Theologica-Nordic Journal of Theology* 43, no. 1 (1989): 5-6.

^[9] See Tina Beattie and Ursula King, ed. *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 4-9; Rita Gross, "Where Have we Been? Where do we Need to Go? Women's Studies and Gender in Religion and Feminist Theology" in *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, Tina Beattie and Ursula King, ed. (New York: Continuum, 2004), 22; Katherine Young, "From the Phenomenology of Religion to Feminism and Women's studies" in *Methodology in Religious Studies: The Interface with Women's Studies*, A. Sharma, ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 36; and Elina Vuola, "Patriarchal Ecumenism, Feminism, and Women's Religious Experiences in Costa Rica" in *Gendering Religion and Politics*, H. Herzog and A. Braude, ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

^[10] 'θεωσις'; translates verbatim as 'making divine' or 'deification.'

^[11] See also this detailed explanatory essay: <http://www.immorfou.org.cy/seminario-klirou/1485-stsinantisi2017.html>.

^[12] These criticisms are mentioned in various works, such in Susan Heine, *Women and Early Christianity: Are the Feminist Scholars Right?* (SCM Press Ltd., 1986) and David C. Ford, *Women and Men in the Early Church: The Full Views of St. Chrysostom* (South Canaan, Pennsylvania: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1996).

^[13] Romina Istratii, "Beyond a feminist 'hermeneutics of suspicion': Reading St John Chrysostom's commentaries on man-woman relations, marriage and conjugal abuse through the Orthodox *phronema*," *The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research* 11 (2018): 16-47.

- [14] See for example, Chandra T. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 61-88; Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Uma Narayan. "The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Nonwestern Woman." In *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, edited by S.G. Harding, S.G. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 213-224.
- [15] *Patrologiae Graecae Tomus XXXVI: St. Gregorius Nazianzenus. ΛΟΓΟΣ ΑΖ'* (Migne, 1858).
- [16] Elizabeth Gassin, "Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Men's Violence against Women" in *Religion and Men's Violence against Women*, A. Johnson, ed. (Springer: New York, 2015), 165.
- [17] See also Gassin, "Eastern Orthodox Christianity," 2015, 163-175; Paulette Geanacopoulos, *Domestic Violence: A Training Manual for the Greek Orthodox Community* (New York: Greek Orthodox Ladies Philoptochos Society, Inc., 1999).
- [18] Gassin, "Eastern Orthodox Christianity," 2015, 163-175; Andrew Stickley et al., "Attitudes Toward Intimate Partner Violence Against Women in Moscow, Russia," *Journal of Family Violence* 23 (2008): 448; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, "Violence against Women: An EU-wide Survey," 2014, <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/violence-against-women-eu-wide-survey-main-results-report>
- [19] Romina Istratii, *Adapting Gender and Development to Local Religious Contexts: A Decolonial Approach to Domestic Violence in Ethiopia* (London: Routledge, 2020).
- [20] Romina Istratii, "Decolonising aetiologies and theories of IPV in public health scholarship and practice: Insights from an ethnographic study of conjugal abuse from an Ethiopian Orthodox *Tawahado* community" in Development Studies Association Conference 2019, 'Opening up Development', 19-21 June 2019.

Article published in English on: 19-8-2020.

Last update: 19-8-2020.

UP