

Christian-Muslim Relations: Texts, Past, and Present

Written Assessment n. 3

Topic: Select one area of historical or theological interaction between the Christian and Islamic traditions (this can be one you have covered in Assessment 1 or 2).

Analyse and assess its **continuing relevance to**, and **influence on**, those **contemporary interactions** between Christian and Islamic communities.

Introduction

In the following essay, I have chosen to explore the contemporary implications of different theological interpretations – with important connections to and repercussions on the historical, political and social spheres – relating to the role of women in Christianity and in Islam. In the previous paper I introduced this topic by quoting some arguments published on the web and supported by some Christian and Muslim believers regarding the treatment of women by the other faith. Starting from verses or suras cited insistently to reaffirm their position on gender equality, Christians propose a greater consideration of women and gender equality compared to Muslims, who, on the other hand, underline that gender equality is declared by the Koran and that Islam brought about a great improvement in the condition of women in societies that were strongly patriarchal. For their part, some Muslims question the presumed feminine "freedom" of Western women, which often focuses only on their bodies, not on other and perhaps more important areas, such as public and political ones (Lucenti, 2020; Mernissi, 2001). The yardstick of freedom on the basis of a supposed Western conception would reside in the body and in the possibility of "using it", "presenting it" and "dressing it" in the way deemed most congenial to women themselves, overcoming the age-old control that society has held over female bodies, in the name of morality and conjugal and family honour.

As explained in the slides of this module, the controversies between Christians and Muslims can be illustrated using three aspects, the first of which regards the scriptures. Due to easy access, representatives of both religions enter into heated discussions on different topics and how these topics are treated in the Bible or in the Koran. The theme of women is certainly no exception; on the contrary, it is one of the most relevant themes that is still brought up today (and perhaps above all today) to often establish a division or lack of communication between these two religions. The hyper-simplification that is found in the media and widespread in Western popular culture describes the Western woman as potentially "free" and the Muslim woman as "subordinate" to her own faith, culture and religion, which deprives her of this freedom (Terman, 2017). The same simplification can be found in Muslim countries where Western women are often represented as debased and reduced to mere sexual objects by their societies, devoid of values and morals. Reality is much more complex, as not only have the scriptures been interpreted in very different ways, but these different interpretations have dialogued with other contextual factors – such as cultural, historical, political and economic ones – creating a multiplicity of realities and practices, such that it is not possible to speak of one "Muslim woman" experience nor of one "Christian woman" experience. There are as many interpretations of Islam as there are women who practice it, with all their unique experiential paths. The same goes for Christianity. The trap of binary

thinking cancels any intrinsic complexity found in Islam and Christianity, bringing each phenomenon back within the paradigm considered hegemonic. As Sehlikoglu argues: “traditional vs. modern, Islamic vs. secular, Islam vs. the West. This binary thinking (of secular vs religious) is so foundational (and tempting) in anthropology and sociology (of religion and religious subjects) that even attempts to complicate thinking can easily be reduced to a reformed version of this binary” (2017, p.85).

Having said that, it is certainly interesting and important to see how these "battles" were played out on the issue of gender equality, without ever losing sight of the "temporary" nature of these situations and the coexistence of several gender-related models. To this end, we will highlight the relevance of this theme in the contemporary dialogue between Muslims and Christians, giving numerous examples.

Narratives and counter narratives

One of the most fascinating themes for me is that of the "compatibility" of Islam with Western values and modernity. Indeed, the issue of the position of women in Islamic societies is often used to "show" the presumed incompatibility of Islam with the values of Western democracies, where two of the cardinal principles are gender equality and secularism. The gender aspect is quite interesting because most stereotypes and prejudices towards Islam are reiterated through the theme of the woman, which acts as a channel through which to use discriminating rhetoric towards the Islamic world as a whole (Lucenti, 2018). For the West, the Islamic woman represents the antithetical model with respect to the “emancipated” Western woman, who to underline her own "modernity" uses the model of the Islamic woman who she defines as passive, subordinate, backward and a victim of both the patriarchal and misogynist society to which she belongs, and of the very principles of the Islamic religion. It is interesting to note how “the woman is the subject on which the West has converged the image of the whole East, making her become the very representation of its immutable essence, of its culture, of its value system. A systematic process of ‘feminization’ and ‘inferiorization’ of the East has therefore inscribed the narration of the latter in that of its women, portrayed as oppressed and backward, and consequently to be saved and made progress” (Pepicelli, 2014, p.17). For the Islamic woman, in the eyes of the West, there is no possibility of social redemption. “The stereotyped and homogeneous image of the veiled, submissive and often abused woman predominates in the collective imagination and is difficult to undermine” (Vanzan, 2006, p.10). Precisely in order to contest the West’s construction of the social, political, economic and psychological inferiority of women in Islamic societies, the so-called “Islamic feminisms” were born and have widely established themselves. This label does not normally recognise all the advocates of women's movements that from Morocco to Iran, Malaysia to Turkey, and up to the United States, fight for recognition of women's rights and equal opportunities within their societies. “Historically, the origins of feminism in the world of Islam date back to the beginning of the last century, when the first female activists appeared in the limelight, in Egypt (Hoda Sha'rawi), Turkey (Halide Edib Adivar), Iran (Tajos-Soltaneh) and India (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain), advocating ideas that partly echoed those launched by the Western sisters: equal rights in the family sphere, full access to education and the vote. Often, then, they accompanied their protests with clamorous gestures of break with local tradition, such as that of revealing themselves publicly” (Vanzan, 2013, p.11). These movements clearly differ from the Western ones in that they do not consider the religious sphere as an obstacle to women's emancipation. On the contrary, these women start precisely from the Islamic religion stating that Islam offers women all the guarantees they need, supporting equality between the sexes. It was men, who historically held the power of exegesis of sacred texts, who interpreted the principles of Islam in a misogynistic key, precisely to exclude women from the public sphere and relegate them to the private sphere. This awareness has seen many women - who previously supported a secular feminism closer to the Western one - recover their faith and be the protagonists of an

autochthonous feminism that aims to re-read and reinterpret the principles of religion from a gender perspective in order to highlight the fallacious interpretations by the male sex hitherto considered indisputable. An example of this change within the women's movements that have established themselves in the Islamic world is represented by the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi. If today she "is considered one of the main Islamic feminists, as she was among the first to propose a gender reading of sacred texts, until the second half of the eighties Mernissi saw religion as an obstacle to women's emancipation. In fact, it was in those years that the Moroccan scholar began to study the sacred texts of Islam and to publish a series of books in which definable positions of Islamic feminism are outlined" (Pepicelli, 2010, p.70). Even if the female movements present in the variegated Islamic world present great differences within it, all are fighting for the recognition of women's rights. "The women's movement that operates within an Islamic framework does not replace the gender activism of women who act outside religious references, it goes hand in hand with this, contributing to diversifying the panorama of struggles for gender equality within the Islamic world" (Pepicelli, 2010, p.44). The examination of the various forms of gender activism in the Islamic world, as well as in the countries of the diaspora, is, in my opinion, extremely important, as it allows us to differentiate and recognise the intrinsic complexity of the female condition; a condition that appears to our eyes, however, homogeneous and devoid of nuances. Although these phenomena, among other things, are gaining more and more interest from the international scientific community, they are still almost unknown by most. Precisely for the purpose, therefore, of denying and deconstructing recurring stereotypes about the Islamic woman who want her to be dominated, passive and invisible, it must be emphasized that (not only) contemporary Islamic societies are crossed by a new cultural and political ferment which sees women as protagonists. These women, thanks both to the activism of the feminist pioneers who preceded them, and to a new awareness, are questioning the cultural and social cornerstones on which the patriarchal societies in which they live were built, in order to affirm one's responsibility in outlining a more just society that gives women visibility, opportunity and recognition.

Mernissi's contribution to the "Islamic feminisms"

The interesting phenomenon of Islamic feminisms – a term not always shared by Muslim women engaged in gender claims of different natures and at different latitudes – has precisely the objective of questioning the presumed incompatibility of Islam with the values of modernity. Mernissi is certainly among the authors who have most explored the question of the Eastern and Western imagination regarding the role of women in society. In her interesting book *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems* (2001) Mernissi highlights the shift in meaning that the harem undergoes when crossing the European border: from an institution that deprived women of freedom to a sex paradise where everything is permitted. Intrigued by the question, the author goes further to understand the cause of this "misunderstanding". The harem – a family institution capable of controlling the spatial freedom of women – loses this connotation in the West to be seen from the point of view of male fantasies and gazes. Centuries of representation by Western artists and writers have helped to paint and represent the East through the image of lascivious and available women, where according to the author the same mechanism of control of female freedom has been put in place in the West and the East in equal measure. In the West the control occurs through the temporal sphere – the inadequacy of women in the face of the loss of youth – while in the East it occurs through the spatial sphere – the control of freedom of movement – which was precisely part of the harem. The West has relegated women to the sphere of beauty by excluding them from the sublime for centuries, starting with the Kantian dichotomy. "In the western world, the irreparable rift between the beautiful and the sublime, body and mind is rooted, so that while beauty is personified by the feminine, the ratio becomes a masculine

prerogative. What then is the use of controlling the body of a woman when she has been dis-educated in the use of reason and deprived of any cultural and intellectual rudiment?" (Lucenti, 2020, p.74). Mernissi therefore highlights that the exclusion of women from the public sphere has manifested itself both in the East and in the West, starting from different assumptions. Considering the body as the only parameter for measuring the degree of freedom of women means applying and universalising a construct born within the West to other contexts as well.

The political and cultural value of the body

The interpretation of the body that is given in a specific society and culture tells us a lot about its values. The body is never neutral. "Every civilization is the bearer of particular body models capable of indicating from a first glance the type of culture or the historical moment that characterises it" (Antoniazzi, 2013, p. 101). Today, in particular, there is a tendency to represent the West as a guarantor and defender of women's rights. But, wanting to problematize, one might wonder: where is the freedom? And freedom from what? Is having to correspond to a stringent model of beauty and perfection in order to feel up to the expectations of others really a freedom? These are extremely important issues that we need to reflect on. Also, for this reason, I believe that a comparison between the female models emerging in the West and in the Islamic world is an interesting track to follow in order to understand the relativity of certain social constructions that underline our freedoms and the lack of those of others. From what, one must ask, are we not free as Western women? The theme of corporeity allows us to be able to read and interpret phenomena of a wider range; in fact, it acts as a mirror that reflects more general social phenomena, such as the relationship between different visions of the world, between women and institutions, between the Islamic world and the West. "Bodies in their presentation to the world are never neutral, they are always social bodies which (...) are affected by cultural, political and historical conditioning and consequently are deeply inscribed in a dynamic and in a practice of power, they are modelled closely related and in reaction to it. The women's body is the bearer of a powerful symbolism that goes beyond those directly involved: it is a battlefield between modernists and conservatives, secular and religious, who, contending for different visions of femininity and the relationship between genders, clash over opposing visions of the world. Their body, veiled or unveiled depending on the historical moment, is taken as a symbol of the nation and its values" (Pepicelli, 2014, p.18). It is therefore clear that focusing on gender issues means first grasping the vision of the world of a given culture and the fractures that exist within it between factions that vie for power. This is true, even more so, with regard to the relationship between West and East and to the imaginary that we Westerners in particular, but not only, have built with respect to otherness and that we still continue to perpetuate today, in homogenizing discourses that concern the "other" at the level of both daily and institutional practice. Africa, for example, during the colonial period, was represented with a woman mostly characterised by animal instincts, ready to welcome the white, western, colonising male with open arms, who was called to "liberate" her. Postcards circulated during the colonial period often depicted undressed African women; thus, they tended to create a nexus between colonial domination and the domination of women in the colonised country. Women were, in practice, part of the spoils of war (Stefani, 2007). Several authors have highlighted how much this representation of women in an exotic and orientalist key is still rooted in our way of relating to the other. "In our current relationship with the 'black', the colonial experience can be a central symbolic element, built up first in the forty years of liberal Italy's colonialism and, later, in the twenty years of fascism" (Burgio, 2013, p.137). Not far from the representation of the black African woman as libidinous and addicted to carnal pleasures, the way in which the Muslim "Arab" woman has been represented also offers us important insights. In the text *The veiled history. The women of Islam in the Italian imagination*, Anna Vanzan analyses the travel memoirs of those who, starting from

1400-1500, went to the countries of the East and the Maghreb that had an Islamic majority. These memoirs describe the customs of the local populations which went on to build and reinforce “what will become two clichés of Western observations regarding Muslim society and its feminine side: women are described as recluses, or as lascivious instruments of pleasure (and often as a combination of both)” (Vanzan, 2006, p.25). Even postcolonial studies tell us that the roots of today's discrimination are to be found in our colonial and imperial past, which cannot be conceived as a finished phenomenon, but which has structured and continues to structure the asymmetry that characterises our western societies today. Colonialism, far from having disappeared, led to a repurposing of the models that characterised the colonies in the very heart of colonialist Europe, determining new forms of citizenship that can only be understood starting from the paradigm of colonial societies. “The expression ‘postcolonial citizenship’ in reference to the current migrant condition symbolises something radically opposite to the previous meaning: it indicates, in fact, the infiltration into the space of European societies of a legal fragmentation (of different legal statuses) typical of the colonial states of the past, or rather a sort of re-actualization of the old distinction between citizen (Europeans) and subject (the inhabitants of the colonies) around which colonial law was organised” (Mellino, 2012, p.68).

Women of national identity

If, up until now, we have analysed the construction of the other through a focus on the Muslim woman as a barometer of the supposed "incompatibility" of Islam with the values of the modern and secular West, it is perhaps now useful to analyse other forms of "reaction" to such a narrative, besides the Islamic Feminisms phenomenon we have highlighted so far. How have Arab or Muslim countries reacted to such stereotypes from the West? Unable to answer this complex question, we will analyse a case study of Tunisia, a country certainly not wholly representative of Islam – as no country can be – but which represents an interesting point of observation and shows us the interactions between imaginary, identity and social practices and in which the history of exchanges and conflicts between East and West continues to "negotiate" the identity anchorage of the country. During my Erasmus Mundus Alyssa international mobility period at Carthage University, I had the opportunity to study educational policies from the arrival of independence in the country up to the current day. What interested me was studying how the country's identity had changed in that period and how this was visible in the three reforms of the education system (1958, 1991, 2002) and in school textbooks. Thanks to previous publications and above all to that of Abbassi (2009), I was able to deepen the question and broaden the identity discourse by including gender, or rather the role of some key female figures in the construction of Tunisian identity, a topic on which I could not find any available publication. The Tunisian identity anchorage has changed since the 1991 reform. This is visible thanks to the analysis of history textbooks. If before this date we find the presence of a Maghrebi identity and a pan-Arabism, afterwards any reference to these identities disappears and only the Tunisian identity is mentioned, as distinct from that of the other countries. Tunisian identity is represented as Mediterranean, leaning towards Europe and with an ancestral history of "3000 years". The leitmotif of the 3000-year history aims to reaffirm that the history of Tunisia does not begin with the Arabisation of the country (as the Islamist parties would have you believe – they aim to strengthen the history of the caliphate to the detriment of links to Europe and the West) but is rooted in the Mediterranean and in the civilizations that originated here, to which Tunisia has largely contributed. With Carthage, the Punic-Carthaginian and then Roman periods saw Tunisia deeply involved in the Mediterranean cultural, economic and social development. The fact of including or excluding this pre-Islamic history in programs and textbooks, for example, becomes the result of an ideological and identity positioning, where battles are played out between Islamists and secularists. The government's choice to include and enhance the pre-Islamic history of Tunisia in 1991 with the

Charfi reform was certainly not linked to mere educational concerns. Even less so if you think that this story is pretty much absent from previous textbooks. But what does this discourse have to do with gender?

With regard to the educational sphere, gender was one of the most significant aspects in the re-reading of identity undertaken in the 1990s, which followed the re-emergence of political Islam in the previous two decades. As a means of distancing from Islamist parties on the one hand and a reaction to Western prejudices of a lack of gender equality in Muslim countries on the other, the Tunisian ruling class in the process of re-reading its identity did not fail to fully include highly significant female figures in the history of the country. The first and certainly the most important of such female icons is that of Dido. Belonging to the sphere of myth, Dido is known in Tunisia as Alyssa. It is said that Alyssa founded the kingdom of Carthage from which the Carthaginian civilisation originated. It is said that the local king Iarbas provocatively granted her the piece of territory that she would be able to cover with an ox leather. Alyssa cut the ox leather into such thin strips that it was able to cover the entire Byrsa promontory from which the kingdom of Carthage was born.



Figure 1. Alyssa and her crew cutting ox hide¹

To this end Alyssa continues to be present in the imagination, and in political and identity discourses. Defined as the "mother" of Tunisians, she is remembered for her great intelligence and cunning. The fact that it was a woman who founded the Carthaginian civilisation, from which

¹ Dido purchases Land for the Foundation of Carthage. Woodcut engraving after an etching (from *Historische Chronica* Frankfurt, 1630) by Mathias Merian the elder (Swiss-German engraver and publisher, 1593 - 1650) from the book "Illustrierte Weltgeschichte. Ein Buch für's Volk, Band 1: Das Altertum (Illustrated history of the world. A book for the people, Volume 1: The Antiquity)" by Held und Corvin. Published by Hartknoch, Leipzig in 1864.

the entire Tunisian people are descended, represents an important counter-narrative for the purpose of distancing both Western and Islamist rhetoric. Cited in the volume *La femme tunisienne à travers les ages* of 1997 following an exhibition on the role of women in Tunisian society, the minister of culture in the introduction of the volume cannot help but start from Alyssa to reconstruct the history of the Tunisian people through the contribution of women.

Equally significant, but more controversial, is the figure of Kahena, a Berber warrior queen who unified the local tribes to counter the Arab advance and occupation. If before the Charfi Reform she was conceived as an enemy as she had opposed the Arab advance (given that the main identity axis was the Arab-Muslim one), following the enhancement of the pre-Islamic Mediterranean history of Tunisia this female character is incorporated into the historical narrative as a hero of the homeland (Jemaï, 1998).

The inclusion or exclusion of certain historical or mythological characters in the national curriculum and textbooks represents an extremely interesting and relevant research path for the purposes of analysing identity changes. The purpose of education is in fact to offer a standard version of citizenship that represents the values of the nation. Between Islamist pressure and institutional repression, the school, through the reforms of the education system, has tried to mediate, defining a "standard" version of what it means to be a Tunisian citizen (Pouessel, 2010). This concept of citizenship was analysed starting from the curricula of history, geography and Islamic education, disciplines directly involved in the construction of identity.

The control of the educational sphere by the secular-based Tunisian government has given identity a new meaning in the light of contemporary needs: to distance oneself from the rest of the Arab world following the return of political Islam and to deconstruct the Western vision of an Islamic misogynist. If this represents only a non-generalizable case study, it nevertheless shows us to what extent the long history of clashes between West and East, Christianity and Islam, still today conditions the representations and social practices of the countries between the two shores of the Mediterranean.

Conclusion

The contemporary relevance and implications of the relations, exchanges and conflicts between West and East, Christianity and Islam have been analysed starting from two phenomena and examples: Islamic feminism and in particular the thought of the Moroccan sociologist Mernissi, and the Tunisian re-reading of identity and the inclusion of women in national history. These two examples show us the weight and influence of Orientalism, where the Tunisian ruling class felt the need to "show" that it was inclusive towards women, often adopting drastic measures, such as the provision forbidding women to wear the hijab in public places, revoked in 2011, following the revolutions or Arab springs.

The two phenomena analysed here start from the same assumptions and then react in very different ways. If Islamic feminisms do not question the validity of religious precepts, but rather wonder about the weight of tradition and culture that would have favoured a certain interpretation of the Koran on the part of men, the Tunisian government of Bourghiba and Ben Ali allegedly distanced itself from Islam and from the rest of the Arab world dominated by the Islamist thrust (Abbassi, 2009). This caused the re-reading of its identity anchorage in the light of this need for the secularisation and modernisation of Tunisian society. In both cases it seems that some form of positioning and reaction against the centuries-old Orientalist construction of the East by the West was inevitable in order to be able to "freely" define itself.

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