



WOMEN AND RELIGIONS

The Difference That Integrates

1 - Main Issue

The feminine question is today one of the most relevant challenges for the Christian Churches, for the different religions and for society in general. In fact, even in democratic countries, legal equality for women is still far from translating into genuine social, professional, cultural, familiar and religious equality.

The focus of this project is the role of religion in this situation and the question whether religious belief is an obstacle or emancipation factor for women. Our main objective will be to construct 'virtuous' modalities in order to address this issue in view of a more open and fruitful dialogue between the subjects involved.

2. Research Focus

Given the strong polarization that characterizes the debate on the role of religions in relation to the condition of women, we intend to develop "good theoretical practices": research paths not predetermined by ideological, apologetic, polemic choices and certainties. We may observe that a significant part of the reflection devoted to this subject is conditioned by the fact that the conclusions appear predetermined already at the beginning of the research itinerary. That is, the hypothesis to be demonstrated becomes the thesis illustrated, so that the results don't offer a real cognitive increment and a means of involving the opposing fronts in a constructive dialogue. On the one hand, an accusatory conviction is highlighted (religion as a factor of oppression and discrimination against women), on the other hand, an apologetic conviction prevails (religion as a vector of promotion of "feminine genius", whatever it may be). This linear dualism proves incapable of generating positive dynamics of self-understanding, self-correction, evolution on the part of the actors involved, and is more harmful than beneficial to the goal apparently shared by all: to promote the condition of women to full equality in safeguarding difference of gender.

In this sense, this project focuses on the construction of shared paths of reflection and investigation that involve the dialogical cooperation of different actors, perspectives, sensibilities, competencies and beliefs.

Our main options are three:

1) *Interprofessional*. The project will involve women from various professional, social and institutional fields in order to promote the convergence of different experiences, competencies and sensitivities.

2) *Interdisciplinary*. The topics chosen must be approached from the perspective of different areas: theological, juridical-political, socio-economic, technological, artistic-performative, historical-cultural.

3) *Interreligious*. It is essential that women from different religious backgrounds work together in research. This will deepen awareness of differences and commonalities in the way religions affect women. Often the apologetic attitude towards one's religion is associated with a disqualification of the other, just as the contestation of the role of religion in the religious condition of the feminine can lead to a generalization that is not very aware of differences.

Interreligious openness is indeed a growing trend in feminine theology, which in this perspective of dialogue and collaboration questions common challenges within different religious communities, beginning with the transformation of the public space through new means (see *Feminism and Religion in the 21st Century: Technology, Dialogue, and Expanding Borders*, Gina Messina-Dysert and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Org.), Routledge, New York 2015).

It is not difficult to recognize the necessarily interreligious and universal nature of feminine reflection on the religious if, in the wake of Rosemary Ruether, we accept that her fundamental "critical principle" is "the promotion of the full humanity of women" (*Sexism and God -Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1992, p.18).

Gaining a concrete insight into the differences and commonalities between religious traditions can be extremely useful in developing a critical and self-critical awareness of the deficits and assets of their respective denominational fellowship. This dialogue can also contribute to the creation of common pathways for promoting the status of women within religious communities and in society.

It is important to note that the most recent research on the feminine issue within religion is focused primarily on the identification of women's emancipatory strategies within society. In collective works such as *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology* Sheila Briggs and Mary McClintock Fulkerson (Org.), 2014, religious belonging becomes a critical key to recognizing and fighting against social conditions of discrimination and oppression of women. The least developed countries find in this feminine reflection a voice of their own, which adheres to the most concrete and urgent problems of the population in general.

3. Aimed Results

We are looking not merely for answers, but for helping the scientific community, the different religious communities and women in general to gain a more informed awareness of problems and opportunities; of what is to be done, what is possible and

what cannot be done for effective promotion of the feminine condition within the different religions.

For this reason, in its interprofessional, interdisciplinary and interreligious reflection process, the project integrates different perspectives, belongings and competences, crossing theological, sociological, anthropological, historical, medical, managerial, NGO points of view, combining studies of religion, literary and visual arts, work experiences, solidarity action in favor of women, etc. This plurality seeks to avoid the overly unilateral and strongly conditioned by explanatory, preventive hypotheses view that undermines the scientific and social fecundity of some trends of gender studies. *

In this sense, to assume that the feminine is only an ideological encrustation imposed by the exterior and not an elaboration, eventually biased and deformed by patriarchal power, but always on the basis of genuinely constitutive elements of the woman's body, runs the risk of subtly taking away from woman, once more, this body that both uneasiness and malaise has always created in the horizon of patriarchal cultures. This traditionally concealed, denied, covered, disguised, or at the opposite exhibited as the material property of an outside owner, often stripped of expression, reduced to silence, may once again be expropriated in the absolute idealization that makes all of its physical peculiarities an optional cultural variable.

It is difficult to find answers to these questions, doubts and fears. That is why it is important to have an intense, free and participative reflection that creates bridges, dialogue and search for shared solutions to common problems, as well as tolerance and understanding for irreducible differences. The thought of sexual difference as a divine gift, not humanly available, characterizes all the great religious traditions, which generally reject the idea that it is a simple cultural and sociological construction. The problem is that historically this difference has become a reason for subordination and discrimination and eventually of oppression and exclusion of women. Religious traditions today are confronted with the need to rethink this difference as an opportunity for humankind and as “unequal complementarity”, which inscribes in human beings their self-understanding as a relationship rather than an identity. This common problem can best be solved in an interreligious, interprofessional and interdisciplinary path of sharing that calls for multiple skills, experiences and visions, while identifying the necessary general epistemological shift implied by this change. The question of rationality is in fact one of the main focuses of this feminine reflection, which seeks to explore new languages and new cognitive patterns, less abstract and reductively homogeneous, closer to experiences excluded by centuries of systematic thought, and confined to the margins of expression (this matter is the core point of the work of a Portuguese-speaking author like Maria Clara Bingemer).

4. Echoes and Upshots of This Project in Portuguese Society

Portuguese society enjoys a good level of parity, not only legal and political, but also social and cultural equality between men and women, but one cannot yet speak of full parity. Public opinion, in general, is divided on the role of religions in this process and in particular on the attitude of the Catholic Church (which is the predominant religious denomination of the country). On the one hand, it is appreciated the solidary work of

volunteers of Christian inspiration in relation to women in situations of economic and existential difficulty. On the other hand, it is contested as regressive conservatism the pastoral orientation in questions of the family moral and in the relations internal to the ecclesial institution, clearly characterized by a univocal masculine hegemony.

It is important to activate a critically consistent and differentiated debate on these two points of view, keeping in mind that questions of family morals, for example, cannot be directly equated with ecclesiological questions.

5. Working methodologies

The project will develop thematic research areas (the question of tradition, contemporary challenges, bioethics, legal parity, etc.), crossing different approaches on the chosen topic: theological, exegetical and historical-cultural work on foundational texts of the different religions involved; the interpretation of symbolic traditions and languages, rituals, artistic works, sacred items; the analysis of data and social and economic phenomena, political events and processes as well as technological developments; the legal institutionalization of gender relations; medical research on biological phenomena related to sexual difference and its implications, such as reproduction. Experiences in the field (of a professional, solidary, institutional nature) and theoretical reflection will come to reflect on models of femininity admitted, foreseen, promoted, tolerated, prohibited by the respective religious tradition, helping to question stereotypes, focusing on difficulties, obstacles and opportunities promoting the role of women.

The project aims to consolidate itself in a broader temporal spectrum, identifying a relevant annual topic to build a comprehensive picture of the feminine issue in relation to religions (motherhood, conjugality, consecration and virginity, discrimination and exploitation, domestic and sexual violence, gender stereotypes, etc.). The scrutiny of the scientific output on the various issues examined will be combined with the use of sources of field experience, in particular in Portuguese society, leading to the elaboration of original interpretative hypotheses and concrete proposals that can be implemented in good practices and initiatives, within society and the different religious communities.

6. Impact and Effects of the Search Results

Dissemination of the results through various channels (public initiatives such as the organization of seminars and workshops, publications, open access of collected bibliographical material) will help disseminate the work of the team at the level of scientific community and public opinion. The objective of sensitizing religious communities on the feminine question aims to yield the creation of a habit of critical reflection and self-criticism, free and consistent according to the very coordinates of scientific research, opening bridges of dialogue and interaction between different worlds: academic sphere, Churches, non-Christians communities, institutions, social organizations, NGOs, public opinion, media bodies will be involved in a diffuse action of reflection, information and debate. Special attention will be given to the creation of an international research network that promotes synergy and collaboration between

different schools, approaches, contexts of knowledge and traditions, in the transnational perspective of the great religious traditions.

7. Impact of This Issue in Other Areas

The feminine question has great relevance in the international academic scene, having generated a new area of research, namely the *gender studies*, that have affirmed and demonstrated vigorously that thinking the feminine implies a general redefinition of what it is to be human. The masculine becomes in this perspective a relational variable of the feminine and not an absolute, impermeable to all the construction. This relational relativization is read in the most radical orientations as the dissolution of the sexual difference in the galaxy of gender differences, in a game of reversible and unstable identities that contingently adjust to existential and cultural contexts in the full autonomy from genetic factualities.

It is very important to develop an open, free and collaborative dialogue with these instances in a positive reception of the central intuition of the relational definition of masculine and feminine. This corresponds to the essential nucleus of the religious word about the difference between man and woman as a matrix character of the human being. Exactly therefore, however, from the perspective of the great religions, one cannot abandon the recognition of sexual difference as a constitutive anthropological component, not dissolvable in a cultural nebula. Insisting on the relational nature of feminine and masculine identities (and their unequal complementarity) allows us to focus sharply on the most urgent and dramatic issues of women's present condition, the still unresolved difficulties of subordination and discrimination, fragility and vulnerability within society and religious communities.

8. Working plan

- *January - June 2019* - Creation of an international network of scientific partners.
- *January - February 2019* - Identification of the extended team. Involvement of researchers from different areas, namely theology, religious studies, sociology, cultural sciences, law, biomedical sciences and researchers from different religious backgrounds.
- *February - March 2019* - Construction of research areas, centered on the possibility and legitimacy of defining the feminine: 1) as a religious category; 2) as a legal-political category; 3) as a socioeconomic category; 4) as a biological category; 5) as a historical-cultural category; 6) as a symbolic category.
- *January - December 2019* - Organization of an international colloquium to mark the public start-up of the project, helping to focus adequately on the objectives and horizons of research, with the participation of internationally renowned personalities.
- *January - December 2019* - Organization of an exhibition on the feminine in the religious sphere.
- *January 2018 - September 2019* - Funding needed to support the costs of the different initiatives and possibly a grant to be assigned to a researcher who coordinates the project from the executive point of view.

- *January - March 2020* - Analysis of the results of the colloquium. Building an international research network with the involvement of stakeholders. Predisposition of a publication that collects the texts of the communications.

- *January - June 2020* - Publication of the colloquium volume and public launch. Work on the different lines of investigation and identification of qualifying topics relating to each line of reflection.

- *December 2019*. Choice of a common topic of work (among many possible: maternity, conjugality, virginity, discrimination and exploitation, domestic and sexual violence, gender stereotypes, etc.) to be developed in an interdisciplinary approach (joining religious, socio-economic, biomedical, historical-cultural, artistic-literary point of view).

- *January - December 2020*. Work on the common topic chosen. Quarterly meeting to coordinate the course of the investigation.

- *December 2020*. Public colloquium presenting the results of the research. Predisposition of publication of the results in volume or dossier in a specialized journal.

In parallel to this calendar, some regular activities take place:

- *Production of periodic reports* for each of these research issues, with special attention to the differentiation of religious qualification. An added value of this research project must be precisely its interreligious nature: the challenge is to put women of different religious and non-religious belonging, working on the same topic in a spirit of cooperation. It should not be an investigation of Catholic women who talk about Muslim women or agnostic women, or vice versa, but the work of women from different backgrounds who think about what divides them and what they have in common.

- *Dissemination of reports and all bibliographic material* relating to the investigation. Creation of a specific section on the CITER website dedicated to this project where the material will be released on an open source basis: 1) the results of studies and colloquia; (2) all bibliographic documentation collected by researchers in the course of their work in order to share not only the products but also the sources and instruments of research with the interested public.

- *Regular organization of lectures, workshops and debates* on key topics of research in order to enhance information and knowledge and to yield civil participation to the public debate on the role of women in society and religious communities.

- *Publication of the most relevant results* of research in specialized journals and in monographic volumes.

9. Anticipated project products

a) Periodic open access reports.

b) Summary of results for the media and brochures dedicated to non-academic target audiences.

c) Integration of reports and all useful bibliographic material on the CITER portal (to be developed).

10. Target audiences

The target audiences of this research project are distributed by the scientific community of religion studies, gender studies, and, in general, of studies of human and biomedical sciences focused on the feminine condition. The interest in this issue goes beyond the academic sphere, encompassing an audience of active women in Christian Churches, religious communities, professional life, institutions and the public, political and cultural scene, generally engaged in reflecting on one's own identity, one's own role and on promoting the status of women.

11. Elements of the Interdisciplinary research team (attached CV):

- Luísa Varela Almendra
- Teresa Bartolomei
- Celine Abecassis Moedas
- Teresa Seruya

- Paulo Pires Vale (exhibition)

12. Detailed annual budget with total project costs and costs for which the entity's support is requested.

(Note: The budget presented here concerns the whole project. The support of **Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa** is requested only for the support of the organization of the International Conference and of the exposition, included the publication of the catalogue. Further requests for funding from the Commission on Religious Freedom and others are underway).

Construction of the project and planning (research and purchase of bibliographic materials)	3,500 €
General coordination (logistics related to working meetings)	3,000 €
Organization of the colloquium (trips and stays of the lecturers)	23,000 €
Organization of the exhibition (logistics related to loans ...)	10.000 €
Publication of the proceedings of the Colloquium	3.000 €
Publication of the Exhibition Catalog	10.000 €
Sub-total	52.500€
Overhead CITER	4.000 €
Total	56.500 €

CURRICULUM of elements of the Interdisciplinary research team

Luísa Almendra

Director of CITER (Center for Research in Theology and Religion Studies) since February 2018. She has a doctorate in biblical theology, in the area of Wisdom writings, with a study published under the title: *A debate on the knowledge of God. Composition and interpretation of Jb 32-37* (UCE, Lisboa 2007). Since 1997 she has been a professor at the Faculty of Theology of UCP in the Department of Biblical Studies. She teaches in the areas of Old and New Testament as well as Biblical (Hebrew) languages. She is a member of the PORTUGUESE BIBLE ASSOCIATION (ABP), and also of several international biblical associations: SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF BIBLICAL AND SEMITIC RHETORIC (RBS); ASSOCIATION CATHOLIQUE FRANÇAISE POUR L'ÉTUDE DE LA BIBLE (ACFEB); e SOCIETY OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE (SBL) where she has presented her research on Wisdom of Israel (on the Book of Job) and in Biblical Semitic Rhetoric. Her main research topics are: Biblical Wisdom Literature; Biblical and Semitic Rethoric; Biblical Intertextuality and Bible and Literature.

<https://ft.lisboa.ucp.pt/person/luisa-almendra?parent-page=1026>

Teresa Bartolomei

CITER full Member and Lecturer at the Faculty of Theology (UCP). She holds a Ph.D. from Program in Literary Theory of the University of Lisbon (with a thesis on Lyrical Figures of Temporality in the Poetry of E.Dickinson) and a MA in Philosophy of Language from La Sapienza University, Rome (with a thesis on symbolism issues in Kant's work).

She carried out a study and research activity on Kant's aesthetics in the Philosophical Institute of Frankfurt am Main, under the supervision of Professor Karl-Otto Apel and collaborated with the "Istituto per gli Studi Filosofici", Naples, and with the Foundation "Comunità di Ricerca", Gallarate. She worked for many years as an independent publicist and translator, based first in Italy and since 1997 in Portugal. She is the author of essays on ethics, religion and literature, published in Germany (Campus Verlag) and in several Italian, French and Portuguese magazines (Nova Renascença, Il Cannocchiale, Fenomenologia e Società, Reset, Conférence)

She was a visiting professor at the Program in Literary Theory (UL) in the academic year 2017-2018 and in February 2018 she published *Radix Matrix* (UCE, Lisbon), an essay on ecclesiality and citizenship, St. Paul and the communitarian dimension of democracy.

Her main research topics are temporality; the relationship between theology, Bible and literature; social ethics.

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Celine Abecassis Moedas

Associate Professor and Vice-Director of the Faculty of Economics at the Catholic University of Portugal. Celine Abecassis-Moedas holds a Ph.D. in Management from École Polytechnique (Paris) and a M.A. in Management (Université Paris Dauphine). She is a graduate from École Normale Supérieure de Cachan and La Sorbonne in Economics and Management. She is Dean for Executive Education, Associate Professor in Strategy and

Innovation Management and Vice-Director of the Faculty of Economics at CATÓLICA-LISBON. Affiliate Professor at ESCP-Europe, where she is the Academic Director of Lectra Chair "Fashion and Technology". She is non-executive director of CTT, Jose de Mello Saude and Europac. Celine Abecassis-Moedas was Assistant Professor at the Centre for Business Management at Queen Mary-University of London and she worked in Business Development at Lectra in New York and as a Consultant at AT Kearney in London.

<https://www.clsbe.lisboa.ucp.pt/pt-pt/pessoa/celine-abecassis-moedas>

Teresa Seruya

Full professor in the Department of Germanic Studies at the Arts Faculty of the University of Lisbon, teaching literature and culture in the German language. She also teaches History of Translation and Translation Theory. She has collaborated with the Catholic University of Portugal, teaching on the translation course and leading (1998-2005) a research project on "Literary History and Translations". She is now responsible for the projects "Intercultural Literature in Portugal 1930-2000: a Critical Bibliography", and "Translation and Censorship in Portugal during the Estado Novo Regime". Her main research areas in the present are the history of translation in Portugal in the 20th century and contemporary migration literature in German speaking countries.

She has published on literature and culture in the German language, particularly from the 20th century, the history of Germanic Studies in Portugal and the history of translation in Portugal. She is a literary translator of the following German authors: Goethe, Kleist, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Döblin, Thomas Mann and Kafka.

https://teresaseruya.com.pt/index_en.htm

Paulo Pires do Vale

He is a lecturer at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa and Escola Superior de Educadores de Infância - Maria Ulrich. He has written *Tudo é outra coisa. O desejo na Fenomenologia do Espírito de Hegel* [Everything is Something Else: Desire in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit]. (Lisbon: Colibri - 2006); and published essays on Hermeneutics, the Philosophy of Culture, the Philosophy of Religion, Art and Aesthetics, and Curating; he has written texts for the catalogues of group exhibitions and solo exhibitions by Ana Hatherly, Alberto Carneiro, Ana Vieira, Carlos Nogueira, Marta Wengorovius, Raja Malka, Rui Chafes, Fernanda Fragateiro, Lourdes Castro, Anne-Valérie Gasc, Agnès Thurnauer and Vasco Araújo, among others. He has participated in conferences, giving seminars and lecturing in several European institutions and universities (Accademia di Architettura-Mendrisio; ENSAP-Cergy; Académie Royale des Beaux Arts - Bruxelles; University Pompeu Fabra - Barcelona; HEAD - Genève). He curated the group exhibition *aqui menos que nada* [here less than nothing], 2008; solo exhibitions by Ana Hatherly, Raquel Feliciano, Tomás Cunha Ferreira, João Jacinto, Rui Chafes, Júlio Pomar; the retrospective exhibition of Ana Vieira, *Muros de Abrigo - Shelter Walls*, at the Museu Carlos Machado and Centro de Arte Moderna - Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian; the exhibition INFINITE TASKS - *When art and book unbind each other*, Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, 2012; VISITATION. *The archive as memory and promise*. Museum São Roque, Lisboa; PLIURE. *Prologue* (Fondation C. Gulbenkian, Paris) and PLIURE. *Épilogue* (Palais des Beaux-Arts, Paris) and Lourdes Castro. ALL THE BOOKS, 2015 (Fundação C. Gulbenkian, Lisboa).

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