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Stellamarina Donato

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1. Author's information

Lumsa University of Rome, Italy

2. Author's contact

Stellamarina Donato: s.donato[at]lumsa.it.

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STELLAMARINA DONATO
LUMSA University of Rome, Italy

Abstract

Review of the book by Ruspini, E., Bonifacio, G.T. & Corradi, C. (eds), *Women and Religion: Contemporary and future challenges in the Global Era*, University of Bristol, Policy Press, 2018.

Keywords: Women, Religion, Spirituality, Interfaith dialogue, Global Era.

The book *“Women and Religion: Contemporary and Future Challenges in the Global Era”* aims to analyse the bond between the construction of women’s identity, religion and spiritual awareness in contemporary societies. The volume, edited by Ruspini, Bonifacio and Corradi, explores both the dynamic relationship between women and religion, and the contemporary and future challenges posed by women’s changes to religion in different parts of the world.

The book is divided into three parts. The first one, more rooted in a comparative past-present perspective, is called: *“Women, gender equality and religion between past and present”*. The second section, named *“Identities, women’s movements and religion”*, emphasizes specific country-based communities in the comprehension of their identities by means of spirituality and religion. The last part is a step-forward path to less known experiences detailing the relation among women and spirituality in contemporary society, it is entitled *“Contemporary women’s religious experiences”*.

“Women and religion” opens up a space for debate on why religions and transmission of faiths have never been related to women, by questioning the imperative androcentric vision of all cultural fragments influencing religious behaviors. Once concentrated on the reading of the essays, it is interesting to notice that there is a massive portion of the volume focusing on the debate concerning Islam and gender equality. The emphasis is

certainly high on the topic, accounting for both experiences in contrast to the Islamic tradition in orthodox- Islamic contexts and to non-traditional Islamic countries, witnessing the latter faith's environments. For instance, "Gender equality in different readings of Islam in post-revolutionary Iran" by M. Bakhshizadeh displays the way "*Islamic laws directly affect women's lives*" (p. 21) and gender equality, for example when debating *qiwama*. "Formation of 'religious' identity among British Muslim women" by M. Velayati attempts "*to explore the ways in which Muslim women negotiate religious and cultural norms and values to promote their interests in everyday lives*" (p. 95). The chapter on Turkey's choices of religious unorthodoxy for women by F. Kemal Kizilca presents a conclusion-undoubtedly strictly related to the way the research is carried out- that "*increased labour force participation stimulated by religious unorthodoxy has a positive association with women's well-being in Turkey as it also encouraged switching from large to nuclear families as well as lower fertility rates*" (p. 169). It stresses the outcomes of both living behind traditional religious paths and of the road leading to women's empowerment.

At the same time, in the book there is a reference to a veil of agnostic faith, intermingled with discussions on both cultural and traditional- based system of women's approach towards spirituality. Two interesting chapters consider the case of the US and discuss this issue. The first one about religion and gender ideology, recalls different attitudes in reference to Evangelic Protestantism and to Mainline Protestants, considered the most well-known and spread religious faiths in the US, where "*Evangelical Protestantism fosters traditional attitudes regarding gender and gender roles*" (p. 62). It debates on how the change in religious affiliation has impacted gender ideology. Another very intriguing essay is the one on "*Explorations of spiritual embodiment in belly dance*" by A.M. Moe. In the chapter, this spiritual experience is considered to improve physical awareness, to *build a strong sense of community* (p. 213) among women, and to create an environment of support.

Within a general overview, it is possible to argue that the choice of the topic debated in the articles follows a specific goal, the one to look at the prominence of interfaith dialogue in overcoming gender stereotypes and in creating a tight community of women fighting for the same rights on a broader scale of issues.

Moreover, the volume's essays debate the role played by religion in the process of integrating different sections and sectors of the societies, as already in the development of the thought of Comte. Indeed, the lack of profound religious explanation in the book, and the decision to include diverse forms of connection to the otherworldly, could be compared to the work of the French scholar in explaining the search for spirituality, which finds its roots in the *profession* of humanity.

There is a deeply compelling essay, the last of the volume, written by Antonelli and Ruspini and entitled: "*From exclusion to inclusion: women and interfaith dialogue in the Mediterranean area*", which epitomizes the core of the previous contributions. It has a focus on interfaith dialogue and women inside the Mediterranean scenario. There is a striking claim of the authors where religion is perceived as an active element of feminism. Indeed, it is affirmed that religion contributes to the development of women and their relation to the contemporary world, where dialogue among faiths can lead to "*peace and stability at a time of increasing geopolitical tension*" (p. 222), as the ones in the current Mediterranean countries.

Most of the connection the essays show are not common topics of analysis. The wide variety of cases presented allow the reader to manage the discussion on contemporary role of women in both identity search and religious wire of connection inside their cultural and country-based atmospheres. The impression the readings transmit is of broader involvement of women in society and in spreading out beliefs, by questioning traditions in both roles and future perspectives of peace and development paths induced by women, seen as *active* participant of their societies. Indeed, there is a strong emphasis on self-agency of women and their power in touching upon religion in today's world. Agency, gender equality and religion appear as the stunning reference point related to channels of identity formation, definition and social change for women in contemporary inter-connected societies, with reference to country based analysis and traditional religious scenarios. For instance, by means of qualitative research the book describes what is changing in traditional religiously affected countries and explores new path experiences. For example, in presenting the essay on "*female sacred paths in Italy*" which, travels through the case of the Turin Goddess Spirituality group or the interdisciplinary article entitled, "*Explorations of spiritual embodiment in belly dance*" by Angela M. Moe, observing, in the US, the effect of belly dance on

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both women's construction of identities and on their recognition of spiritual awareness, thanks to this body practice.

To conclude, the book has significant constructive characteristics. It contains a comprehensive disclosure of current possibilities for spirituality and religion inside women's world. It emphasizes the visible lack of intermixed moments in those societies made up of different faiths. Despite the title preference of the world religion, and the choice of the singular form, the essays account for *spiritualities* in the plural form as they are in contemporary societies. In the end, it may be argued that the major contribution the book presents is an introductory debate on how spirituality can help addressing both a wide array of elements related to social change and individual perceptions in constructing women's identities and their active participation in the world region.