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Gender, Religions and Media: Emerging Themes and Perspectives

Guest editor
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Introduction

Throughout the history of humanity, social groups have built ways of life and cultures, which determined specific roles for men and women. With the creation of such roles, a new ideology of patriarchy emerged in diverse cultures, which established that the basis for social organization and social order rests in the power of man as the leader, as the provider for the family, and even as the preserver of the species. As history demonstrates, this ideology was constructed, replicated and dispersed further through education, religion, law, and the media.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the aim of an ideology is to change the perception of reality and make things ostensibly natural so that men and women would embrace the new ideas and attitudes, reproduce them, and disseminate them further. Recalling the reflections of a Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, along with a new ideology comes always a culture of silence and domestication, which helps embed the new ideology into the social fabric to the point that when people are called to reflect on alternative paths, they would object to it by saying, "no, it has always been like this."

Nevertheless, this ideology of patriarchy has been increasingly challenged in the West. The feminist movements, which during the 19th and 20th centuries have germinated new ideas on gender, along with the progress of science and technology, strengthened and consolidated a process of contestation. One outcome of this contestation was the emergence of the concept of gender beyond feminine and masculine, as an analytical scientific category, which derived from the reflections of philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, who stated that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Another outcome of this contestation was the development of the autonomy of sexuality from human reproduction.

Therefore, the concept of "gender", as an analytical scientific category, challenges both social sciences and human sciences; making it possible to study the new meanings of "masculine" and "feminine" as genders, while also challenging what it means to be a "man" or "woman" from the perspective of the historical understandings of these fixed categories. In this sense, one may conclude that it is not the category of sex that determines the understanding of life, but the category of gender that challenges these fixed historic classifications conceived by the patriarchy on what it means to be a "man" or a "woman". This dynamic also opens new understandings and perspectives on homosexuality and homoaffectivity.

Insofar as the contestation of the patriarchal ideology is concerned, throughout history, there have been some advances in gender justice (e.g. gender recognition, gender representation, women rights, etc.), much remains to be developed in the

social life. In this process, organized religions play a prominent role, especially those entrenched into patriarchal ideology, which either repress movements for gender justice, or are open to change.

Media represented and engaged the dynamics of patriarchal ideology throughout their tensions and progress by affirming it or by opposing it through various communicational processes such as journalism, advertisement, entertainment, social media, and so on. As such, organized religions have been identified not only as participants to the narratives and discourses on patriarchal ideology, but also as their protagonists or producers.

Although interdisciplinary studies on media and religion have been successfully consolidated in the areas of teaching and research, their intersection with the gender studies is still underdeveloped. Little attention has been given to the subject of women and the feminine in the study of the relationship between media and religion, and extremely deficient attention was given to homoaffectivity. However, there is a significant research opportunity due to a rich range of themes and phenomena that occur between gender on one hand, and the intersection between religion and media on the other.

The collection of nine selected papers for this Essachess – Journal for Communication special issue on *Gender, religion and media: emerging themes and perspectives* respond with in-depth analysis to the challenges that emerge from the research opportunities. Although there has been a predominance of submissions on themes around women or the feminine (which is often observed in the most diverse publications on the subject), there are selected papers on LBGTI + and masculinities which highlights the importance of academic attention to these research objects.

In this perspective, Essachess current issue is opened with the theme of authority in religions in digital media times challenged by women's self-performances in these communicational spaces. The paper by Mia Lövheim and Evelina Lundmark outline and discuss the characteristics of a particular form of authority emerging in digital media, but also how it relates to women's experiences of speaking out as religious authorities earlier in history. Authenticity and vulnerability are considered taking into account the recognition that digital media open up spaces of inclusivity and enacting a different ideal of authority.

Digital media and religious authority is also the object of the contribution of Monika Andok to Essachess. The author worked to find out whether male or female media usage is more similar to each other or the differences against two different religious beliefs are stronger. The empirical research detailed in the paper has shown the strength of religious rules in the way women and men interact with digital media.

The impact of religion on gender representations in popular TV drama series, soap operas, in a Muslim environment, is covered in the paper presented by

Dimitra Laurence Larochelle. The author shows how soap operas can function not only as tools of a country's soft power outside its borders and of promotion of a specific political orientation but also as tools for the promotion and perpetuation of a government's world view inside the country. The taboo of the sexuality, the importance of motherhood, the underrepresentation of LGBTI + community and of ethnic or religious minorities, the "sin" and the attribution of justice are some of the elements present in this reflection.

Sameera T. Ahmed reflects the increasing presence of female Muslim voices in both mainstream media and minority or community media in her paper. The researcher demonstrates that in converging their gender and religious identities, women are generating new discourses that challenge widely held stereotypes and start new conversations about identities or what it means to be female, to hold a nationality and a religion.

On the other hand, two paper see, through critical lens, how media can mediate the maintenance of the patriarchal ideology and misrepresent minorities. This is approached by Nadia D. Zasanska, whose paper explores the visibility and role of religious women (orthodox Christian priests wives) in representations, expressions and maintenance of patriarchal ideology in social media, without disregarding the new perspectives that rest at the intersection of gender, religion and media.

A critical view is also focusing on the news coverage of the November 2018 US Congressional electoral process that saw an unprecedented number of women especially minority women (black and Muslim) run for office. Maha Bashri's paper shows how news coverage of Muslim women candidacy was congruent to prevalent schemas in representations of Muslim women and minorities in US media.

The representation of masculinity in the media is also part of this paper collection through the work of Mathieu de Wasseige. The author presents an instigating study through the perspective of Catholicism in a fictional media context (a TV series) with a study on reception. Wasseige reflects that the men in the series analyzed are complex as masculinizing beings who define themselves in and through their relationships with others. The characters show a constructivist view of identity. Non-binary or continuum are significant topics covered in this paper.

Two papers close Essachess special issue with a contribution that relates media, religion and LGBTI+ themes. Moises Sbardelotto analyzes the communicational action of a Facebook group to point out how the digital environment becomes an alternative public space for religious minorities, who can also have a "public and networked word" about religions, exponentiating religious "diversity" in the fabric of social relationships. Mathieu de Wasseige examines, through the analysis of the movie "Love man love woman", directed by Vietnamese Nguyễn Trinh Thim, how the media performance allows to

demystify the "sacred destiny" fiction of the transgender male mediums within worship of Mother- Goddesses in Vietnam. The analysis is placed in a broader context of hegemonic culture and the mediatization of normative heterosexual discourse.

The significant number of submissions for this Essachess current issue is indicative that there is an increasing trend in this field of study, not only in approaches to the intersection of gender, religion and media but also a significant diversity of objects of analysis, methodologies in different regions of the world. Essachess offers here a contribution to open the way for new possibilities for analysis and new studies.

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