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GENDER AND RELIGION IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Theoretical approaches**

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Since 1989, Central and Eastern European countries have experienced political and economic changes which have without doubt influenced social life and forced a new appraisal of the roles of men and women. The awareness of sex/gender difference has been examined on many different levels and has become an important part of academic research. In this article, the authors analyse feminist publications from the last twenty years and ask how the idea of gender has influenced religions and religious communities. They investigate how the notion of gender is understood, on what levels it can be explored and how it is present in religion. The article offers an overview of studies on gender awareness in religious teaching and religious communities (including some of new religious movements) in Central and Eastern European countries. Furthermore, it presents the most recent research into the religious influences on social roles of women and how women perceive their roles in society and the Churches. Finally, the authors ask whether the connection between gender and culture includes religious references, where gender, culture and religion meet, and what problems emerge in that meeting specifically with the example of Poland.

Keywords: gender, sex/gender difference, feminism, religions, religious communities, social roles

Gender und Religion in Mittel- und Osteuropa: Ein Zugang über Theorien: Seit 1989 haben die Länder Mittel- und Osteuropas viele politische und wirtschaftliche Wandlungen erfahren, die zweifellos das gesellschaftliche Leben beeinflusst und eine neue Sicht der Frauen- und Männerrollen erzwungen haben. Das Bewusstsein der Differenz zwischen dem biologischen und kul-

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turellen Geschlecht (engl. sex und gender) ist auf verschiedenen Ebenen analysiert worden und bekam einen wichtigen Anteil an wissenschaftlichen Forschungen. Die Autorinnen analysieren feministische Publikationen der letzten 20 Jahren und fragen, in welcher Art und Weise das Gender-Konzept Religionen und religiöse Gemeinschaften beeinflusst hat. Sie erklären, wie der Begriff „Gender“ verstanden und auf welchen Ebenen er analysiert wird und wie dieses Konzept in verschiedenen Religionen auftritt. Dieser Artikel ermöglicht einen Überblick über den Stand des Genderbewusstseins in den Lehren von Religionen und religiösen Gemeinschaften (einige neue religiöse Bewegungen eingeschlossen) in Ländern Mittel- und Osteuropas. Darüber hinaus stellt er neueste Forschungen zum Einfluss von Religionen auf die gesellschaftlichen Rollen von Frauen vor und wie Frauen selbst ihre eigenen Rollen in Gesellschaft und konfessionellen Gemeinschaften sehen. Abschließend fragen die Autorinnen, ob die Verbindung zwischen Gender und Kultur auch religiöse Anknüpfungspunkte beinhaltet und wenn ja, welches die Berührungspunkte zwischen Gender, Kultur und Religion sind und welche Probleme daraus entstehen. In diesem Teil beziehen sich die Autorinnen beispielhaft auf die Situation in Polen.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Gender, Geschlechtsdifferenz, Feminismus, Religionen, religiöse Gemeinschaften, gesellschaftliche Rollen

1. Introduction

Twenty years after the beginning of the transformation of the political systems in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the question of the mutual relationship between gender category and religions in this region has still been insufficiently elaborated. Only a few recent publications take up the challenge of covering the whole region (ANIĆ & MIŠČIK 2001, 165–68, BUDAY 2003, ADAMIAK et al. 2009).¹ One group of women who do aim to reflect on these questions in Central and Eastern Europe is the growing number of women researchers in theology, religious studies and related theological disciplines, associated in the European Society of Women in Theological Research (ESWTR), who have organised regular biennial regional conferences since 1998. These have mostly explored topics of importance for particular countries at a particular time.²

¹ For further discussion of women in Central and Eastern Europe see also ‘Schwerpunkt: Frauen in Mittel- und Osteuropa’, *OST-WEST: Europäische Perspektiven* 2002, 2 and KLANK (1997). The conference ‘Gender and Religion in Central and Eastern Europe’, organised by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung in Berlin and Frankfurt/Oder in November 23–25, 2001, is also worthy of mention in this context. This conference focused on the Polish and German experience; there was no publication or post-conference volume.

² 1998, Prague (Czech Republic): *Women and Theology in the Time of Transformation*; 2000, Lublin (Poland): *Motherhood as Locus Theologicus*; 2002, Riga (Latvia): *The Identity of Women in the Churches of Post Socialist Countries*; 2004 Borovets (Bulgaria): *Women’s Spirituality – Theological and Social Perspectives: Women in the Church Keepers of Spirituality, Peace, and Stability in One Dynamic World*; 2006 Prague (Czech Republic): *Women Commemorating Women: Spiritual Leaders in Central and Eastern Europe*; 2008, Cluj (Romania): *Contribution of Women in Shaping the Spiritual Features of a Unified Europe: Past Experiences that Shape the Present and the Future*. For more information: <http://www.eswtr.org> (retrieved 25 March 2009).

Despite these efforts, one fundamental reason for the lack of research in this area is the continuing problem of the imbalance between men and women, both in religious structures and amongst those who work academically in these fields. Historically it has been women researchers who have introduced the perspective of gender category into academic research, and this has been the case for all disciplines. In the situation of Central and Eastern Europe, we can see that women researchers themselves are as marginalised as the subject of gender/sex which they take up. All of this is the result of a process deeply rooted in tradition, common to all world religions as well as to mainstream patriarchal culture.

The questions of the mutual relationships between gender and religions in Central and Eastern Europe can be approached by raising questions which also refer to all other regions of the world, such as the understanding of masculinity and femininity, or the investigation of the concrete possibilities attributed to representatives of either sex/gender in religious structures. However, it is also possible to explore the processes characteristic of this region, such as the proposed projects 'theology after Kolyma' (CHROSTOWSKI 1991), 'theology after Gulag' (NOSOWSKI 1992; HALIK 1993, 1997), or 'theology of the Second World' (MÁTÉ-TÓTH 2000, 2002a, b).

Taking this approach requires two subjects to be taken up:

1. the question of how the experience of persecution in the post-war history of the region was related to sex/gender and to explore the changes that have been connected to religious freedom after 1989;
2. the question of the influence on the women's movement of the time after 1945 during which equal rights formed part of governmental propaganda, sometimes influencing women's situation in reality, sometimes only apparently.

With regard to the current situation in Central and Eastern Europe, this means exploring how a women's movement has developed in society, and in religions and Churches, and whether there are commonalities between them (ADAMIAK 2002, 2003a, b).

The exploration and analysis of 'Second World theology' has not yet progressed very far. There are two apparent reasons for this, which are pointed out even by some of the initiators of 'Second World theology'. First, the situation in each of the particular post-communist countries is distinctive for cultural, historical, and religious reasons. Therefore it is almost impossible to discover homogeneity in these processes of changes (KŁOCZOWSKI 1998; HALIK n.d.). Secondly, challenges relating to the whole world, such as globalisation, have begun to play a more essential role and have made observers more aware of the similarities between some countries of Western Europe and those of Central and Eastern Europe (HALIK n.d.). Similar concerns arise when we ask about relations between gender and religion in this context. Nonetheless, we wish to examine the notion of gender and to systematise possible analyses of the religious phenomena which result from it. The aim of this article is to analyse the questions which have been at the centre of discussion with reference to a particular country, on the assumption that there is no typical, representative country for Central and Eastern Europe. We will refer to Poland as the country we are most familiar with;

however, references to other countries will also be made. Of all religions, Christianity plays the most important role in those regions of Europe which have been analysed, although we will also refer to other religions. We will trace the similarities and differences of debates about femininity and masculinity, the concrete opportunities of men's and women's involvement in religious structures, their social roles, and examples from culture and art, which touch on gender and religion.

2. Gender: definition, main theories, presence in religion

Describing the connection between gender and religion is not possible without an explanation of the definition of the problem. In other species 'sex has not turned out to be as important as for human beings' (KUCZYŃSKA & DZIKOWSKA 2006, 7). When the notion of 'gender' appeared the question who or what exactly a 'human being' is became more complex, and the making of a distinction between sex and gender has raised a variety of discussions and theories. Basically, 'sex' is defined as a biological aspect of human existence and 'gender' as a social and cultural aspect of that existence, related to 'gender identity', the psychological aspect of gender³ (DZIEKANOWSKA 2008, 58). Gender is one aspect of human identity. It ensures identification with other people from the same social environment whilst also influencing the subject.

Gender can be analysed on many levels: biological, psychological, sociological, historical, cultural and – last but not least – religious. This is the main reason why gender studies have emerged in many fields as well as having a strongly interdisciplinary approach. When the movement of radical feminism⁴ started to show that the private sphere of women's lives is in fact also a political question, and to argue that family and other social structures are constructed according to the preferences and interests of men, the problem of the differences between the sexes became the core of the discussion. Radical feminists rejected the assumption that a necessary connection exists between biological sex (male or female) and cultural gender (masculine or feminine), asserting instead that these two aspects are separate but that patriarchal society uses strict gender roles to keep women passive and men active (PUTNAM TONG 1998, 49). In 1972, the sociologist Ann Oakley defined

³ The notion has its origin in the psychology of Freud. Other psychologists have taken a different approach to the question. Current psychology tends to understand gender as an individual variable (one of the factors responsible for differences in people's behaviour), a social category (the basis on which people take decisions and define appropriate behaviours) and as a social construct (people create gender rather than possess it) (RADOMSKI & TRUCHLIŃSKA 2008, 11).

⁴ The main streams of radical feminism developed in the 1960s and 1970s the USA. Earlier founders of radical feminism include Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Emma Goldman, and Margaret Sanger. Ti-Grace Atkinson maintained that a political system of oppression based on gender difference is the model of any kind of discrimination. Radical feminism seeks to define a perspective for perception of the world from the position of a woman. The task of radical feminism is to abolish a system of gender classes (HUMM 1993, 67–68).

the notion of gender in her book *Sex, Gender and Society*, inspiring historian Joan Wallach Scott and philosopher Judith Butler to explore it from other perspectives (GASPARD 2007, 629). Gaspard suggests that the concept of 'gender' has helped 'to liberate [understandings of sexual difference] from a naturalistic conception of humanity and show that relationships between men and women are the result of many factors: cultural, historic and social' (2007, 629). Hence, according to Gaspard, the domination of men is no longer a necessity and the violence which women are victims of is not unavoidable.

In these theories, the biological aspect is still treated as a base for gender.⁵ The 'role of gender' refers to a set of attitudes and behaviours expected from the sexes and often presented as ideals. The criteria for functioning as a woman or as a man are thus expressed in stereotypes giving rise to gendered behaviour. Masculinity and femininity can thus be seen to be social constructs, the feature of a situation rather than the property of a person. Stereotypes operate as a kind of cultural heritage, although they often seem to be in opposition to actual social life. Consequently, they can be a source of identity conflicts for both men and women (DZIEKANOWSKA 2008, 59).

On the basis of prior attempts of systematisation, mostly in British and German literature, the German feminist theologian Heike Walz has identified a number of possible methodological consequences arising from the sex and gender differentiation (WALZ 2006, 53–76). In particular, she identifies five different approaches to gender category in religious writing:

1. absent presence;
2. gender definition;
3. gender difference;
4. gender constructivism;
5. gender deconstructivism.

She also notices that different approaches can overlap or generate the same results (e.g. in statements stressing the equality of men and women on one level, but assuming difference on another). Talking about the absent presence of gender in religious texts, the author focuses on those which explicitly do not refer to gender category. The vast majority of texts formed in religious traditions, also in Central and Eastern Europe, belong to this category. Those texts have not been regarded as central to the study of concepts of masculinity or femininity. However, if it is acknowledged that gender is one of the most important ways in which our perception of the world is structured, then it is vital that such texts should also be analysed with regard to implicit gender ideas which they include. Although these are unconsciously expressed, their impact can be positive as well as negative, frequently corresponding to the stereotypes which limit both genders.

The second way in which gender categories may be present is through the def-

⁵ Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* (BUTLER 1990) presents the opposite perspective, arguing that the basis of human existence is the cultural aspect which defines the biological one.

inition of categories considered as male or female. This assumes the bi-polarity of sexes, but it also tends to assume that being a man or a woman means the same in all cultures and throughout the whole history of civilisation. References to the 'essence' of femininity (but seldom to the 'essence' of masculinity) are very common in this approach. Such presentations of sex/gender difference are often referred to as essentialism or ontologism. This kind of approach appears to be popular in religious texts which explicitly refer to the gender category. The other three approaches are rooted in criticism of this ontological approach as neglecting the particular contextual aspects of being a woman or being a man.

The stressing of gender difference highlights the connection between gender difference and other historically changeable socio-cultural differences such as race, class, nationality or sexual orientation. This avoids the isolation of gender as a category. This model seems to enable greater sensitivity to historical changes and to the possibility that a variety of processes of gender differentiation might exist in different areas even within one cultural circle. Such an awareness is essential for considering gender and religion in Central and Eastern Europe. This idea is more developed in the fourth model – gender constructivism. The fundamental task of this approach is the question of in what ways and according to which project the concepts which enable the transition from biological sex to cultural and social gender are constructed. Here gender is understood as assigning a particular place in society to people of particular sexes. There is no doubt that religions contribute to the creation of such social gender construction. The result is the possibility of 'double looking' (*zweifacher Blick*): an awareness of present gender difference but also of how those differences are experienced (for the hermeneutic of 'double looking', see MEYER WILMES 1996, 45–72).

The model of gender deconstructivism changes the perspective of the previous two. They referred to the move from sex to gender but here the question is reversed, asking how the 'cultural glance' defines our perceiving of biological sex. This approach does not deny the existence of physical embodiment or biology, although it is often interpreted this way, but offers a deconstruction of them, asserting that they too are not objective data but some kind of cultural norm (BUTLER 1990). Such a radical questioning of the identity of men and women offers an alternative to the debate which oscillates between stressing the equal dignity of both sexes/genders and the differences between them, variously defined. However, the discussions which have taken place since the publication of Butler's book have had very little influence on the discourse of religious studies and theology in Central and Eastern Europe.

There is also some discussion of the definition of male gender. In Poland this discussion is mainly situated in university faculties other than theology. A number of Polish authors, such as Paweł Leszkowicz, Zbyszko Melosik, Anna Nacher, Małgorzata Radkiewicz, Andrzej Radomski and Ewa Wójtowicz, have explored questions of how men are present in the public sphere and culture, but have not considered religion. These authors conclude that masculinity understood in a patri-

archal way is in crisis. Here, crisis does not have a negative meaning, but is rather understood as a chance for positive change, despite the problems which stem from that change. For instance, a man who is a father should be involved in family life in a similar way to a woman who is a mother. A man ceases to be head of a family and becomes an equal partner to a woman. However, he also has to find his identity in a world which can no longer offer him clear social expectations (CIENIUCH 2008, 70–71).

3. Understanding of femininity and masculinity in religious texts

As has been mentioned above, most religious texts from Central and Eastern Europe, whether by male or female authors, take one of two approaches to the relationship of gender and religion: absent presence or gender definition. Those which refer directly to sex/gender categories are interested mainly in femininity, silently assuming an understanding of masculinity.

One exception to this is Rebeka Anić's detailed study of women in the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia during the twentieth century, which explores the understanding of both masculinity and femininity (ANIĆ 2003, 25–48; 2004, 230–370, 442–714). Anić distinguishes three basic types of sex/gender theory during the period under analysis: subordination of women to men, equality, complementarity. The first type is located primarily in the time before the Second World War; the second in the time of communism and its official ideology; the third one in the Roman Catholic Church's teaching after the Second Vatican Council. Most interesting for our purposes is her consideration of the theory of complementarity. On the basis of an analysis of sources by Croatian authors, Anić demonstrates that there are two variations of this theory. The first, despite argumentation of complements of characteristic features attributed to men and women, in fact results in a new version of the subordination theory, and Anić refers to it as complementarity/subordination. The second, which occurs more frequently, seeks to show that both sexes/genders are equal but different. This is done by describing the psychological features connected with femininity. The accent here is on the importance of partnership in characterising the relation between sexes/genders: its proportionality, polarity and reciprocity. Anić appreciates this way of thinking about sexes/genders on an anthropological level, but she points out the deficiencies of its social consequences. In particular, equality of rights and partnership are seen in terms of male and female roles which are still understood traditionally.

Over the past few years, Polish religious literature has demonstrated a marginal interest in the subject matter of femininity. Two tendencies can be distinguished amongst those authors who are interested in this question. The first is characterised by a parallelism of interests, understanding the inter-relationship between femininity and masculinity. Sometimes (unfortunately very seldom) this approach also problematises any reference to women in a general way. The second, which appears

more frequently, is characterised by unilaterality. The authors take up femininity, assuming a defined way of understanding it, and do not specify the foundation of their definition. Most often, femininity is defined in terms of a description of female features, generally derived from the maternal function of women: sensibility, protection, mildness, caring for others, willingness to make sacrifices (ADAMIAK 2008, 189–213). Both these tendencies have their equivalents in Mariological literature: the first stresses that Mary is the pattern for all believers – women as well as men. The second sees in Mary the ideal of a woman or of femininity; most often this is a maternal ideal.

These approaches have consequences in the perception and definition of women's social roles. Here too maternity is stressed as a fundamental vocation of women, together with – and resulting from it – the educative role of women in the family. Having a vocation for professional work or involvement in public life is not considered to have a religious aspect and questions of women's rights and women of homosexual orientation are not mentioned at all (SOBKOWIAK 2008a, 215–38; SOBKOWIAK 2008b, 239–57).

One surprising result, connected with insufficient reflection on the use of anthropological categories related to gender, was demonstrated by Monika Waluś. Polish hagiographic literature sometimes glorifies female saints by attributing masculine characteristics to them, thus implicitly presenting the conviction of the authors of such publications that masculine characteristics are superior to feminine ones (WALUŚ 2008, 175–87). In many cases the model of the 'absent presence' of gender category is shaping these religious texts.

Milka A. Hristova has explored social sex/gender roles in new religious movements in Bulgaria, referring to Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. Here too the tendency in the understanding of masculinity and femininity is a theoretical acknowledgement of the equality of men and women with simultaneous defining of their roles. For women these are traditional roles relating to the home, family, private sphere. Hristova also identifies examples of movements which directly propagate the subordinated role of women (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses and The International Society for Krishna Consciousness), but only one movement which not only propagates but also realises the equality of men and women: Bahá'í. Hristova concludes that 'Bahá'í gives preference to women in the community and they enjoy wide respect and full equality' (HRISTOVA 2009, 81).

Hristova's research suggests that not only those religions which have long been rooted in Central and Eastern Europe but also most new religious movements do not propagate a vision of femininity which could transcend the traditional characteristics associated with it, especially within the family and the home. In many of the religious sources under consideration, these tasks, which refer to the wider social, cultural, public activity of women, are derived from feminine characteristics, especially those based on maternity.

4. Women and men in the structures of religions

Literature in which the question of women and men in religious structures is taken up exhibits a similar lack of balance to that which explores the problems of masculinity and femininity: here too it is the roles attributed to women which are discussed, whilst in most cases there is a tacit assumption that male roles need not be questioned, because they are obvious. Very few commentators have noted the weakness of them in this respect (BORKOWICZ 1996, 51–57; WĘGLEWSKA 2003, 8–16). Considering the social changes of the last twenty years and their influence on the situation of women in different religions, some tendencies can be observed. The first suggests a lack of major changes within religions: in the context of a process of deep social changes, this could be evaluated as a failure to grasp opportunities. The broadest project so far, exploring the situation of the Catholic Church in Central and Eastern Europe's countries, investigated the situation of women, of laymen and of teenagers.⁶ Rebeka Anić and Peter Miščik considered the influence of communism on religiously involved women, concluding that on the one hand it supported clericalism in the Church, thus pushing women to the margins of official structures and decision-making bodies, whilst simultaneously propagating their role of faith guardians. On the other hand the atheistic criticism of religion as the sphere of people who were mentally weak and in need of support deterred many men. Anić and Miščik conclude that under democracy the Church is still a Church of women directed by men. Indeed, they even speak of the development of some countries – for example Croatia – into 'neopatriarchal societies'. As a more positive example they cite the former Eastern German Democratic Republic (GDR), where women could be employed in the Roman Catholic Church as parish assistants (*Seelsorgehelferinnen*) and catechists (*Katechetinnen*), and were given a relatively high degree of independence, although their ecclesial status was not defined clearly. Anić and Miščik also observe increasing criticism after 1995 on the basis of the difference between the Church's theory, which propagates the equality of sexes in dignity, and its practice, which does not offer real opportunities of development for women (ANIĆ & MIŠČIK 2001, 165–68).

Similar conclusions may be drawn on the basis of research into the reception of the Roman Catholic Church's teaching about women in Poland between 1978 and 2005. It concluded that the position of women in the Church is not widely discussed in Polish literature, even amongst Catholic authors. The opening of liturgical functions, such as that of acolyte, reader, or extraordinary minister of Holy Communion, to women, possible after the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, are known and practiced only in small numbers of dioceses and parishes in the Church in Poland (CHOŁODNIUK 2008, 96–101; CHRZĄSTOWSKA 2008, 390–425). Similarly, although there are no limits in the Church's theory, women rarely

⁶ This is the project *Aufbruch I*, conducted by the Pastoral Forum in Vienna and headed by Professor Paul Zulehner, which considered Croatia, the Czech Republic, Eastern Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Rumania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the Ukraine.

become theologians, in any ecclesiastical tradition, whether Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox (BYNOWSKI 2008, 319–60).⁷ In Poland since 1989 the possibilities of involvement of the laity have been used to some small extent, including a few women in the Church's structures. The smallness of these numbers seems to result from habits of distrust towards lay co-workers, including women, acquired before 1989, but with deeper roots, which causes difficulties among many priests in the recognition of women as equal partners.

This picture partially corresponds to the conclusions of Elżbieta Przybył-Sadowska, who compared the situation of the Orthodox Church in Poland and Ukraine. Przybył-Sadowska emphasises that in the making of this kind of comparison the differences in the degree of persecution for religious reasons between the countries of the former Soviet Union and, for example, Poland, where the Churches had more possibilities of activity, should be taken into account. Przybył-Sadowska identifies two opposing strategies used by women in Polish and Ukrainian Orthodoxy. Although in Poland before 1989 the activity of the Church's hierarchy was possible, albeit in a much reduced form in comparison with the period before 1939, the activity of lay societies, including those of women, was forbidden. These societies were restored after 1989. We may talk here about a process analogical to that described above for the Roman Catholic Church. In the Ukraine, in contrast, because of the stronger persecution of the clergy, the central role in the protection of the faith was played by women, mostly elderly (the so-called *babuszki*, grandmothers). After the transformation of the political system, the return to parish structures resulted in a new emphasis on the role of ordained men, and the banishing of the 'grandmothers' to the sidelines. This results in a more radical situation than that described by AniĆ and Mišćik in which women have less influence on the Church's life after the restoration of religious freedom (PRZYBYŁ-SADOWSKA 2009, 46–50).

Taking up the religious life of Muslim women in Poland and Lithuania, Agata S. Nalborczyk found that after the Second World War, in situations where an imam was not available, older women conducted prayers and funeral ceremonies. She notices the singularity of this situation, since nowadays in other countries the ceremonies can be conducted only by men. Even today some women, especially Tatar women, head up Muslim communities and religious societies. This seems to be especially difficult to accept for those Muslim believers who have come to Poland and Lithuania as emigrants (NALBORCZYK 2009, 62).

Another example of the second tendency is the history of the women who were involved in *Koinotes* communities of the Roman Catholic Church's underground movement in Czechoslovakia. The very existence of these communities shows the very aggressive forms of persecution in this country. In these communities – includ-

⁷ According to questionnaires carried out in the years 1978–2005, during this period, women who studied theology in Poland defended 182 PhD theses, i.e. 11.15% of all PhD theses in theology, and 8 post-doctoral degrees (*Habilitation*), i.e. 2.17% of all post-doctoral degrees. According to statistics from 2005, women make up only 8.05% of the total number of people employed in theological faculties as academic teachers.

ing, besides ordained men, also those who were married – women were ordained into both the diaconate and the presbyterate. The best known examples of those are Ludmila Javorová and the following Magdaléna Záhorská. The decision to ordain these women demanded great courage because of fear of repression, including the possibility of being sent to prison. The lack of importance of these women's testimony to the Church's hierarchy after the 'velvet revolution' is indicated by the fact that despite their requests to the Vatican for an explanation of their canonical situation, they have not received any answers (WINTER 2001; SEPP 2004).⁸

A somewhat different situation can be observed in some other countries and particularly in some Protestant Churches which introduced the ordination of women during the time of the communist regime. The changes introduced in this period, which was generally unfavourable for religion's development, have consequently turned out to be valuable for women in some Churches. Today, women are ordained in a number of countries of Central and Eastern Europe: in the Lutheran tradition, in Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Rumania, Slovakia, and Slovenia; in the Reformed tradition, in Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Rumania, Slovakia, and Slovenia; in the Methodist tradition, in Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, and Russia (ANDORKA 2003; SCHLARB 2007). In 1999 Jana Šilerová from the Czechoslovak Hussite Church became the first female bishop from Central and Eastern Europe.⁹

The Mariavite Catholic Church is also worth mentioning in this context. This Church emerged in the 1930s; within one branch of this Church (Felician), the ordination of women is practiced and in 2005 Bishop M. Betrycze (Damiana) Szulgowicz was the head of the Church.¹⁰ However, this Church, small in number, does not belong to the Polish Ecumenical Council.

The picture of the ordination of women in Central and Eastern Europe's countries would not be complete if the Churches which do not practice it were not taken into account. Amongst forty-four European Lutheran Churches which are members of the the Lutheran World Federation, thirty-eight ordain women. Of the six which do not, five are Churches of Central and Eastern Europe: former Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro), Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia (KARSKA 2007). The best known situation is that of the Lutheran Church in Latvia, which in 1975 introduced women's ordination, but in 1993 abandoned it again (BALODE 2003, 74–76). Simi-

⁸ Lack of space makes a more detailed presentation of this complex problem impossible. The women were ordained by Bishop Felix M. Davidek after the synod in Koberice in 1970. This was before the publication of two important documents forbidding the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church: the declaration *Inter insigniores* of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (1976) and The Apostolic Letter of John Paul II *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (1994). Bishop Davidek died in 1988, before the collapse of the system, and he was therefore unable to explain this matter personally in the Vatican. In 1992 the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith released the document which explains the status of ordained married men in some detail. The unimportance of women's ordination was stated in one sentence.

⁹ A Latvian Lutheran woman, Jana Jeruma-Grinberga, has recently become Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Great Britain; she is the first female bishop in any denomination in the United Kingdom.

¹⁰ A woman, Antonina M. I. Wılucka-Kowalska, was also head of this Church between 1940 and 1944.

larly, in the Ukrainian Reformed Church (which has Hungarian roots) the ordination of women was abolished in 2007.

In the Churches of Protestant tradition we can, therefore, observe different tendencies: some show no changes to women's situation in the Church's structure after 1989; in others the situation of women has deteriorated; in still others, changes which took place during the communist regime have contributed to the strengthening of the position of women.

5. Feminist discussions of the religious influence of women's social roles

Approaching this topic from the perspective of feminist authors is justified because feminists are present in the public sphere and remain the primary commentators of all situations connected directly or indirectly with women. Feminism is a complex notion because of the great range of perspectives and divisions. However, all feminist approaches share the fundamental assumption that women experience injustice because of their sex, so that feminism is an ideology of women's liberation (HUMM 1993, 60; SOBKOWIAK 2008c, 445). Feminists in Poland usually do not associate themselves with a particular feminist movement but they are involved in a variety of feminist organisations and societies. The same phenomenon can be observed in other Central and Eastern European countries.

In the Polish discussion, different feminist authors hold different opinions about the influence of religion on the situation of women. Some think that the socialist state and the Roman Catholic Church contributed to a deterioration of the situation of women (WĘGIEREK 1996, 5). They perceive the Catholic Church as a totalitarian system and believe that, as such, it has repressed women more than any male group. A woman may appear in a public sphere to speak about the sanctity of the family or of population growth, but women are usually not the initiating subjects of the discussion (PŁATEK 2000, 9). Węgierek notes that after 1989, the Church became one of the participants in political struggles over questions such as abortion or relationships between homosexual people.

Feminist authors write about the Roman Catholic Church's teaching in texts concerning certain specific topics such as abortion, contraception, maternity and sexuality. These are difficult, problematic and complex subjects on which the Catholic Church has strong views. The voice of the Roman Catholic Church has a significant influence on Polish social consciousness. Feminists criticise the opinions of the hierarchical Church and its presence in the public arena, especially politics. They criticise its lack of understanding of women as subjects of their own lives, the inadequacy of the Church's responses to life conditions, the limits placed by the Church on woman's personal freedom, its limiting of women to their maternal role, and its lack of deep knowledge about feminism (SOBKOWIAK 2008c, 507). However, most feminist authors in Poland seem to forget that there are other Christian Churches and religions besides the Roman Catholic Church. Sociological re-

search carried out between 2003 and 2006 among the members of different Christian Churches and religions in Poland indicates that they too contribute to Poland's religious landscape.¹¹

How then is the Catholic Church perceived from a feminist point of view? One of the foremost feminists in Poland, the philosopher and former plenipotentiary for the Equal Status of Women and Men, Magdalena Środa, argues that Catholicism in Poland is 'something more and something less than religion' (ŚRODA 2007, 654). Środa sees it as a way of living, an object of fascination, a criterion of classification of both people and rituals. She argues that Catholicism has been influential in preserving a culture in which the incidence of domestic violence is quite high. The vast majority – around 90% – of the victims of domestic violence are women. This situation is caused – or at least exacerbated – by an understanding of family which expects an individual to sacrifice themselves for all the other members. Środa believes that priests do not encourage women to resist aggression and violence, but rather seek to convince them to be patient and bear it with dignity. However, her hypothesis seems rather vague and needs to be analysed in a wider context, not least because the Roman Catholic Church has not produced any formal consideration of this question. Consequently, there is a lack of reliable information within the Church about organisations taking care of violence victims (KUPCZYK & SOB-KOWIAK 2008, 268).

In discussions of the anti-abortion law in Poland, feminists maintain that the problem is primarily one which affects women, but observe not only that those who determine the law are men, but also that the Church has a significant influence on public life and social consciousness relating to abortion. A similar situation can be observed with relation to matters such as contraception or homosexuality. The first and second reports of the Federation for Women and Family Planning¹² in 1994 and 2000 show that despite the teaching of the Church, women do use contraception; despite the risks, they do decide to have illegal abortions (NOWICKA 1994; NOWICKA & TAJAK 2000). Foreign publications have also noted the strong influence of the Church on the anti-abortion law in Poland, which they attribute to its significant position. Considering the problem of abortion in the wider European context, LAURANT (2007, 354) comments that the situation in Latvia and Slovakia has recently changed as a result of the growing influence of religion. In Slovakia, similarly to Poland, a woman's right to abortion has given rise to a political conflict. In Rumania, the situation is different: abortion was legalised after 1989. However, here too this is one of the crucial questions for the gender discourse (BODO 2009).

In 2000–2001 a sociologist, Joanna Tomaszewska, interviewed twenty Cath-

¹¹ This research is presented in LESZCZYŃSKA & KOŚCIAŃSKA (2006) *Kobiety i religie*, referred to in the text.

¹² The Federation for Women and Family Planning (Pol. Federacja na Rzecz Kobiet i Planowania Rodziny) is a Non-Governmental Organisation. Its role is the defence of conscious maternity rights, the improvement of health care, and support of women on many levels in areas related to reproductive health.

olic feminists.¹³ To date, her survey has been the only one of its kind in Poland. Its method was the in-depth interview. Asked about abortion, one group of women said they consider the Church to be primarily an institution and did not feel bound to obey its rules. The rest of them believe that they agreed to respect the Church's teaching when they declared themselves to be Catholics (TOMASZEWSKA 2004, 113).

In 2003–2004, another sociologist, Anna Maria Szutowicz, conducted a survey of conservative women from five villages in the south of Poland. Szutowicz observes that the Catholic vision of the world is not homogeneous because of the complexity of the Polish discourse, but argues that religion influences all dimensions of the life of the faithful, including their language too (SZUTOWICZ 2006, 161). It was noticeable that the respondents did not derive their knowledge about the Catholic Church's teaching concerning human sexuality from official sources. This knowledge, Szutowicz presumes, is filtered through the media and local priests. She divides interviewees according to their age. The eldest group (age 60–90) presents the most conservative attitude to abortion. These women tend to perceive being a mother as God's blessing and as a value that brings social respect. For them abortion is always the worst solution and represents a violation of boundaries put in place by God. The second group (age 30–59), maintains that abortion is a dramatic decision for a woman. These women think that a decision to have an abortion can be justified in some cases, such as a pregnancy arising from rape or one which is dangerous for the woman's health. The last group (teenagers and 20s) is divided in their opinions. Some think that abortion is bad; however, some of them agree with a right of free choice. Only the first group of women, the eldest, consider contraception as something against God's will. Most women think that contraception may not be beneficial for a woman's life and health, but it is more acceptable because it prevents the need to seek an abortion, which is a worse solution. Szutowicz also noticed that respondents used the language of Catholic discourse and pro-life environments mixed with medical language.

Writing about sexuality, feminist authors underline that the Church is not an ally of this dimension of human life. Indeed, the Church is perceived as an enemy of homosexual people and its ostensible 'sympathy' towards homosexuals in practice means 'rejection' (MIZIELIŃSKA 2000, 105). Analysing Catholic documents, Mizielińska, an expert in gender studies and queer theory, observes that homosexuality is still treated as a disease. A sample of thirty-four lesbian women with whom Marzena Stana conducted in-depth interviews in 1993 suggested that the

¹³ The problem is more complex. TOMASZEWSKA explains: 'Four strategies of how to combine feminism and Catholicism can be distinguished. The first strategy is smoothly to unite both systems. The second is to assimilate those elements of feminism which are not in conflict with Catholicism, which is an approach taken above all by Catholics. The third is the reverse: feminists incorporate some elements of Catholicism if these do not clash with their feminism. The fourth option is the most complex and is adopted by the women who are equally devoted to both feminism and Catholicism, neither of which can be selected as the primary identification. These women are the most predisposed to conflicts, and their solutions differ radically from one another' (2004, 113).

Church insinuates feelings of guilt which results in mental problems. They felt discriminated against by the Church and one of the women interviewed described a case in which a child was accused of homosexual orientation during mass. These women underlined the fact that their situation is extremely difficult in small towns and villages, where a negative attitude towards homosexuality is confirmed by the position of the Church (STANA 1994, 81). According to Mizieleńska the attitude of the Church is deeply connected with the political approach to the problem, and she notes the Church's strong influence on Polish politicians.

Stereotypes connected with the roles of women and men are deeply rooted in Polish society. A woman who does not conform to the stereotype of a wife and mother, or who withdraws from these roles, is treated as a betrayer of femininity. In this context a lesbian cannot be a woman in a whole sense, and lesbian relationships remain a taboo in society. The Church is a significant factor in this situation (BUTKIEWICZ 2000, 31).

The Church's document which provoked the strongest feminist reaction was the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration between Men and Women in the Church and in the World* (2004). This was released from the Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith when the Dean of Congregation was Joseph Ratzinger.

Feminist commentators have noted that the document is directed at men and that it contains no discussion about collaboration between men and women (STEFAŃCZYK 2004, 31). Men are to define and demonstrate the true call, dignity and role of women. Stefańczyk thinks that the authors of the *Letter* have created an abstract woman and man who are only stereotypes and not real. Moreover, the authors did not ask women themselves how they perceive their role and their position as women in the Church. It is apparent that the Church and feminists use a different language of discussion about the roles of women and men, refer to different knowledge, use different argumentation, and perceive the problem from different points of view.

6. The symbolic order of motherhood in feminist texts

Feminists believe that the Catholic Church has always had a great influence on forming the opinions about maternity. Shana Penn, an Irish woman living in Poland, suggests that the Black Madonna of Jasna Góra (an image of Mary placed in a sanctuary church in Częstochowa) has strongly influenced women's lives because of her connection with the history of the country. The ideal of Mother Pole, a female symbol of patriotism, has also contributed to the acceptance of a woman's role in society, whilst excusing their passivity in the political sphere. Catholic culture, and particularly the cult of Mary, have determined the social position of women as mothers and form the Mother Pole model. Mother Pole is perceived as a secular counterpart to Mary who combines devotion to her family as well as religious and

patriotic values (BUDROWSKA 2000, 192). She is directed by love and kindness, functions as a guardian of morality and introduces the Christian virtue of purity of heart into daily life (SOBCZYŃSKA 1995, 70). The interpretation of woman, of her role, and the focus on maternity as the most important stage of a woman's life, emerges from the cult of Mary (BUDROWSKA 2000, 189). A special cult of Mary has existed from the beginning of Christianity in Poland. The oldest extant hymn and prayer in Polish both worship Mary as a mother. Sociologist Bogusława Budrowska supports Penn's opinion as to the role of Catholicism in the creation of maternity ethos in Poland.

A further dimension of the cult of Mary strengthens the identities of women and of relations between women (GRAFF 2008, 46). This is illustrated by Klau-dyna Świstow's survey, conducted in 2003/2004, by means of in-depth interviews, amongst women aged between 20 and 50 from a rural area of Southern Poland. ŚWISTOW (2006, 139) asked how women exist in an environment in which the influences of Catholicism are very strong, and how they place themselves in the framework of the Church, which is directed by men. Her results indicate that for these women, Mary is a symbol of a mother, and this perception is not limited only to abstraction. The women seek to follow Mary in each situation and especially in difficult moments of their lives. The cult of Mary permeates these women's private sphere. However, when references to Marian cult are present in a public space they are appropriated by male politicians in order to help them create an allegory of Poland who is mother of all Poles.¹⁴ One consequence of this is that many politicians see the place of a woman at home, and not in the public space. They are also involved in the opposition to the abortion law.

In the teaching of the Church the position of woman and her way of life is clearly described. Her way of life is limited to marriage and maternity, stressing her passive participation in that process. This model of woman makes her similar to Mary: she is obedient, patient, subordinate, and 'although she serves, obeys and subordinates, she creates a functioning family. (BUDROWSKA 2000, 175–76)

Budrowska believes that fulfilment of a woman through maternity means assigning to her the passive role of 'a tool' that only realises divine plans. The mystery of femininity understood in this manner would be realised in a woman's giving of herself – like Mary – in order to fulfil the role of 'a servant' (185–86). A new perspective on Mary, elaborated by a number of feminist theologians, is less well known amongst women in Poland (for Mary and feminist theology, see ADAMIAK 1997).

Budrowska underlines the particular feature of Polish Catholicism which defines women on the basis of their relationships. Unlike a man, a woman is forced to explain her decisions about marriage, children and their number, because

[t]he mystery of femininity appears – in the opinion of the Church authorities – by means of or thanks to maternity. But what has to be stressed is that in this way feminine partici-

¹⁴ Politicians of rightist parties often visit Mary's sanctuary church in Częstochowa to vow faithfulness to her national values.

pation in maternity is passive – woman is only ‘a carrier of life’. It is God who is a true donor of life, whereas a woman may at best cooperate with him in the act of creation. (BUDROWSKA 2000, 181)

However, such an understanding of the role of women only in terms of maternity is often criticised by women. Women seem to be conscious that maternity is just one aspect of their lives and it does not have to dominate.

Feminist authors perceive the Church as an institution and criticise the opinions of the hierarchy, in particular the failure of the Church hierarchy to recognise women as active subjects of their own lives, and the limitation of the role of women to motherhood. The dissonance between the official teaching of the Church and its practice is evident, particularly in its attitudes towards homosexual people, which may harm them as members of the Church. When discussing the Roman Catholic Church, Polish feminist authors are not interested in the role of men. They also appear to think about society as a religious monolith in which there is no Christian confession of faith other than Catholicism, nor any religion other than Christianity.

7. Culture and gender

Our discussion of the religious aspect of the problem of gender in culture will be limited to a few main events which have been present in the public arena. In Poland, any artistic work, event, or installation in which an author uses religious symbols is noticed and responded to by Catholic commentators. The most frequent reaction is a sense of abuse of religious sensibilities. The short outline presented below is in no way exhaustive, but considers responses to the work of two artists who explicitly focus on the relationship between gender and religion.

One of the most important artists to address the role of gender is the installations artist Dorota Nieznalska. Nieznalska’s artistic activity has aroused ambivalent emotions and perceptions from the beginning. The following examples will help to explain why Nieznalska is so strongly criticised by some groups of people in Poland. In *Modus Operandi* (1998), Nieznalska presents statements by rape victims, and tries to show that society perceives the woman, rather than the man, as the one who is guilty: the woman is thought to provoke the rapist. In *Stigmata* (2002) Nieznalska presents a large photo of a woman’s body lying in a crucifixion pose on the floor with a cow’s hide hanging above her, on which the masculine line of a family – father, son, brother – is written. Here the artist presents Catholicism as a system of gender torture in which a woman is dominated by masculine signs, symbols, and names (LESZKOWICZ 2003). *Passion* is regarded as Nieznalska’s most controversial piece of art. Here she uses the symbol of the cross once again, putting male genitalia on it. This exhibition was partially closed, and Nieznalska was accused by members of the political party Liga Polskich Rodzin of abusing religious feelings. Her work was understood to be an intentional provocation of the Catholic Church.

Nieznalska's work has been widely discussed not only in Catholic circles but also, and primarily, in the public sphere. The ideas which shape her work are deeply connected with questions of the role of women, and comments on her work are therefore also present in feminist publications. Feminist comments have been generally positive, seeing her work as offering input into the discussion of masculinity. Indeed, Magdalena Ujma believes that Nieznalska was punished precisely because she took up the subject of masculinity in her work, and explored masculinity in the context of authority, violence and aggression (UJMA 2004, 50).

Responses to Nieznalska's work indicate that a discussion about gender located in artistic space and using religious symbols can be perceived both as endangering social norms and as wounding religious sensibilities. It is important to consider whether this results in any limitation of artistic activity and, if so, whether it is connected with a strong position taken by a particular religion in a particular country. It would appear that one particular issue with Nieznalska's work is that it refers to masculinity in connection with religious symbols, which is rather unusual. Works which deal only with femininity are not criticised/received in such an aggressive way, and that discourse is located where it belongs: amongst critics of art, and not amongst rightist politicians.

Another kind of art in which connections between gender and religion have their voice is literature. One of the more expressive examples is Olga Tokarczuk's work *House of Day, House of Night* (TOKARCZUK 1998). Here the author asks about the meaning of existence but not within any organised religion. In her books 'an alternative world view appears which is non-aggressive towards the Christian one' (CZAPLIŃSKI 1999). *House of Day, House of Night* has a plot relating to sexual/gender identity, expressed by two characters: Kummernis, the saint known from Medieval legends, who is a woman – Christ-like – at the cross, dressed in female clothes but with a bearded face; and the monk Paschalis, the man who writes down her legend two centuries later and who feels inside himself that he is a woman. Kinga Dunin, a well-known Polish feminist and literary critic suggests that this 'sexual/gender plot is also developed on other occasions, however in a non-declarative and ambiguous way' (DUNIN, 1999). Tokarczuk's writing has not provoked such heated critical reactions, but is rather adopted with growing approbation. It seems to be characteristic that topics taken up in feminist theology of Poland's German-speaking area, on the Polish-Czech-German border, appear in literature. It seems that art might be more sensitive and it reacts to changes – in this case concerning sexual/gender identity – faster whilst maintaining its proper forms.

8. Conclusion

Research into the mutual connections between gender and religion in Central and Eastern Europe are still relatively little advanced. Whilst quite detailed studies exist for some countries, in others few scholars are interested in the subject. Hence, any

conclusion drawn here must have a partial character, based on available studies and data. This conclusion is somewhat surprising given the fact that multidisciplinary gender studies have been developing for the past twenty years in this area of Europe, and also given that research in theology and religious studies have been liberated from the previous structural and ideological limitations under the communist system. However, despite these similarities of experience, the last twenty years have seen this already historically and culturally very differentiated region subjected to further differentiation in terms both of religion and sex/gender issues. It is therefore increasingly difficult to identify processes which are homogeneous across the whole region: there may always be exceptions or opposing tendencies.

Bearing this double stipulation in mind, some general conclusions can nevertheless be drawn on the basis of the considerations presented here. Firstly, an analysis of religion from a gender perspective does not allow the construction of a simple, black-and-white scheme of changes after 1989. The increase of status of religious institutions, allied with the freedom of conscience and confession, has caused women to lose the informal but essential role of faith guardians, which they had during the communist era, to men who hold offices or official positions within church structures. In some countries it is possible to speak of a radical worsening of the situation of those women who were the most active during the previous era. In others, structural changes such as the ordination of women have been introduced. Here it is possible to look at the time before 1989 and appreciate the processes which were advantageous for the situation of women within the different religions. In some countries, earlier tendencies which were concentrated on clergymen have not been influenced by the changes after 1989, although an extension of such possibilities for women theoretically exists.

Secondly, ideas about masculinity and femininity are still closely connected to the definition of sexes/genders within the mainstream of religion in Central and Eastern Europe, and in particular to the definition of femininity as distinct from masculinity. This leads to a concentration on maternity as the fundamental vocation of women, and thus to the definition of femininity according to characteristics derived from the maternal role. A few studies problematise sex/gender categories, but they belong decidedly to the minority. Generally, this kind of issue is not perceived as central, but instead is rather marginal in religious studies and theology.

Thirdly, religion does not play a central role in the development of gender studies. On the whole it is regarded negatively, and its influence on women is criticised as unjust and harmful. When talking about religions or the Churches attention is focussed on their institutional dimension, that is, on the area in which women still have the least influence.

From this follows, fourthly, that religion and gender perspectives are generally portrayed either as entirely contradictory or as entirely unrelated to each other. The problems of these positions are observed in disputes about the abortion law and women's reproductive rights, a characteristic phenomenon not only for this region of Europe. The fact that religion and gender perspectives are perceived as entirely

unrelated to each other is perpetuated by stressing different problems, or the omitting of those which are important for the other side. There is consequently a lack of research into violence towards women in theology or religious studies, one of the most important topics within the feminist movement.

Finally, the interest in gender and religious issues can be noticed in areas other than academic reflection, and particularly in the artistic sphere. It shows the importance of the problem for socially sensitive people and also points towards other possibilities for further research, whose aim is to bring together both perspectives.

However, the fundamental question for further research for the next few years in Central and Eastern Europe will focus on how the processes of globalisation and European integration will influence the status of religion in society. Will those processes lead to an analogical fall of this status in the countries of this region as it did in Northern and Western Europe? Will another change of the role of men and women in religious structures be connected with it?

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