

A Commentary on Maria Alcidi's "Religion, Security and Gender: An Unholy Trinity?"

Alessandra Gribaldo

Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology, Dipartimento di Studi
Linguistici e Culturali, Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia,
Italy
alessandra.gribaldo@unimore.it

Working within institutions to confront power structures and try to change them is an exhausting task, often subject to frustration and failure. The text "Religion, Security and Gender: An Unholy Trinity" is an occasion to take stock, offering a breathing space to better understand and reflect on the interplay between religion, security and gender.

Maria Alcidi starts from her experience as head of the team tasked with negotiating the Decision on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women. She quickly realizes there are issues that cannot be discussed and words that cannot be voiced; there is nonetheless an acknowledgement during the negotiations that gender inequality, with its various forms of discrimination and economic marginalization, is at the root of violence against women. This recognition is an achievement in itself, reminding us how structural violence *is* violence. We could indeed further reflect on the relationship between inequality and violence. It is clear that inequality causes violence, but it is equally true that violence and the very threat of violence – that is, the possibility of it taking place, even in oblique ways – is what sustains, reinforces and reproduces inequality. Hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy, intersectionality: these terms cannot always be debated in institutional contexts as they sound like a threat. The point is that they are indeed a threat: to hold them to account necessarily means questioning the institutions themselves. Although feminism draws on powerful theoretical elaborations, in structural terms the practices of feminist and transfeminist movements struggle to be drawn into a system that has been constituted through their exclusion and marginalization. The very language of politics and law does not provide a proper tool to talk about intimacy and domestic violence in such a way as to allow those

who suffer to narrate their experiences and claim rights.²³⁸ The phenomenon of gender-based violence eludes quantitative “hard facts and data,” as Sally Engle Merry²³⁹ has pointed out. The innovative modes of qualitative social research that can convey the experiences and difficulties of subjects marginalized by gender, sexual orientation, social class, religion and racialized by origins and belonging are not likely to be taken into account in institutional settings. What violence is, how it can be witnessed and how it can be proven and recognized is complex. Who has the ability to speak out and what can be said? The literature is vast on how states, laws and institutional policy are impervious to questions arising from social marginalities (even compelling ones such as the refugee issue).²⁴⁰ However, it is in particular the everyday, domestic dimension that makes gender-based violence something especially elusive to institutions. The public–private divide that feminism has always contested reverberates in the distinction protector vs. protected; also the focus on security – as in the expression “*messa in sicurezza delle donne*” in Italian (providing security to women) – has to do more with the security of the state and much less to women’s safety and freedom. Alcidi’s reflection, including her personal and professional positioning, focuses on the three Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – that, with due historical differences, all “sacralize the male godhead and the patriarchal family.” Religion, to be sure, is a cultural fact that regulates faith and morality and thus exceeds the narrow dimension of belief. Yet it is generally recognized today that home and family represent an insecure space for women. Religion is closely linked to kinship, family, intimacy and gender: gender complementarianism, womanhood, motherhood, dignity vs. rights (especially reproductive rights), and the gendered space of social reproduction are mostly deemed undebatable and naturalized in religion discourses. Family and kinship are therefore a privileged space for feminism to assert that intimate relationships, marriage, motherhood, traffic in women, heteronormativity and fertility control are *political* issues. The encounter between anthropology and feminism on these points offers a productive opportunity to analyze discourses, break continuities and bring out the political dimension of

238 Fineman, M. and Mykitiuk, R. eds. (1994) *The Public Nature of Private Violence*. Routledge; Merry, S. (2010) *Gender Violence: A Cultural Perspective*. Wiley-Blackwell; Mulla, S. (2014) *The Violence of Care: Rape Victims, Forensic Nurses, and Sexual Assault Intervention*. New York University Press.

239 Merry, S. (2016) *The Seductions of Quantification. Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence, and Sex Trafficking*. The University of Chicago Press.

240 See among others Fassin, D. ed. (2011) *Juger, réprimer, accompagner. Essai sur la morale de l'État*. Seuil; Tazzioli, M. (2019) *The Making of Migration: The Biopolitics of Mobility at Europe's Borders*. Sage.

the intertwining of kinship and gender.²⁴¹ Anthropologists who have carried out research in religious contexts, particularly Islam, have been able to bring out from specific ethnographic fields the practices and discourses of women who experience, inhabit and live norms through forms of religious discipline that differ significantly from practices that the Western (secularized and liberal) feminist movement claims as liberatory. In this way, notions of agent-subject, autonomy and oppression have been interrogated, highlighting different modes and different degrees of response to the meshes of power.²⁴²

The fact remains that gender violence is practiced worldwide, also where there is not a strong religious culture. Neoliberal policies recognize and put gender differences “to work” – giving value to them when needed, domesticating them, making them productive – but they certainly do not repel gender violence, as is clearly seen in the levels of partner violence and murders of women, especially transgender people, migrants and prostitutes, in countries where secularism is dominant. One might ask whether it is really possible “to build a counternarrative of a plurality of gender constructs which rest upon an egalitarian ethos” (as Alcidi argues) by confronting religions, feminist theologues and the work of feminist scholars. This would indeed be a challenge. The point is that scholars cannot do it alone; it takes an intersectional linkage that brings subaltern subjectivities together. It remains unclear how feminist biblical scholars can really captain this struggle but they could contribute to opening up spaces and inspiration to break normative discourses. What is certain is that they can only do so *together* and within a broad movement. If we talk about religions of the book, religious institutions and the state, it is evident that the interests that cut across these three dimensions are deeply intertwined. Institutions cannot be expected to move against established norms; only an intersectional and grassroots movement can hope to make an impact on a new politics of gender, one which stands against violence, militarism, colonialism and racism. That feminist movements of any kind intersect, confront, fight and proliferate is perhaps what can make the difference.

241 Rubin, G. (1975) The Traffic in Women: Notes on the “Political Economy” of Sex. In: Rayna R. Reiter, ed. *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. Monthly Review Press, 157–210.

242 Abu-Lughod, L. (2013) *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Harvard University Press; Mahmood, S. (2005) *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press.