

Introduction

WOMEN, RELIGIONS, AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT: The mutual understanding of human rights between cultural and religious roots and different conceptions of social roles is challenged by the intersection of legal, social and political aspects between the two shores of the Mediterranean.

The perspective that this chapter will analyse is that of depolarisation between the conflicting visions of human rights on both sides, using the key of religion-post-secularisation. In this sense, the affirmation of women's rights in the Mediterranean identifies religion as a particularly relevant actor, both as a potential tool for affirming gender rights and, conversely, its limit. The space between the two shores of the Mediterranean continues to have its own specificities, even as the impact of the illiberal politics of the global right globalises the issue of women's rights and the risk of attack to which they are exposed. Seen from this perspective, women's agency within religions describes behaviours of empowerment or resistance, but also of 'doing religion'. At the same time, women's agency is also manifested in how they relate to public power, including the relationship between religion and the State. While women's rights lie in the implementation of international treaties, the effectiveness of these instruments depends on their rootedness in each country's legal and cultural consciousness. The chapter concludes by outlining the main features of the volume and the main lines of thought suggested by the authors.

SUMMARY: 1. An intersectional view on the role of Mediterranean Women. – 2. Women's rights under attack. – 3. Beyond secularism, recovering the public role of religion. – 4. Women's religious agency. – 5. Women's rights at the crossroads of religion and politics. – 6. The contributions of the volume.

1. An intersectional view on the role of Mediterranean Women

Is there a common thread linking Mediterranean women's status and emancipation? What is the role of the legal, social and political arrangements of the Mediterranean countries in achieving gender equality? Does the religious factor hinder or encourage this aspiration?

In order to analyze the role of women in the current Mediterranean context, it is necessary to adopt a cross-cutting perspective among several dimensions of study. Indeed, there is a high degree of complexity in talking

about the situation of women. In fact, talking about the condition of women implies many different dimensions of investigation, both in terms of how women constantly negotiate the space of their political action and affirmation in a given context, in a word, in terms of what is commonly referred to as feminist theories and practices, and in terms of the characteristics of the contexts in which women act. That is to say, women's role in the national context is always located (Crenshaw 1991), which in our analysis does not mean ignoring the interdependent dynamic factors. This includes all the historical, social, political and legal factors that influence the protection of women, whether positively or negatively.

In this sense, the situated space in question consists of the specific area between both coasts of the Mediterranean, which historically goes beyond a physical space, expressing its religious, philosophical and cultural globalization (Ferrari 2014).

In fact, it is becoming increasingly clear that there is more than economic interdependence between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean. The two sides of the Mediterranean constitute a geopolitical space where different versions of human rights have to face one another.

In this sense, the mobility of borders and people, but even more the interplay between basic models of human rights protection, is highlighted by colonialism and postcolonial criticism, on the one hand, and migration, on the other. Thus, the understanding of human rights on both sides of the North-South divide is called into question.

This questioning of the mutual understanding of human rights first begins to penetrate the contexts of European countries with the stable presence of people with a migration background. It is an encounter between European principles and values on the one hand, and different understandings of social roles and the consequent recognition of rights on the other. In this respect, the idea of human rights and its connection to the cultural and religious roots of the countries of origin raise profound questions that need to be understood and that make it necessary to assess their compatibility with the legal and social substrate in which they are embedded. At a higher level, it is a question of their compatibility with the paradigm of human rights that is recognized at the international level.

But the interdependence also extends southward, with a reverse movement: The internationalization of human rights is also a yardstick for evaluating legal, political and social systems in this area. This issue has been particularly highlighted by the Arab uprisings, which have provoked a real reflection on these rights by demanding greater recognition of the protection of fundamental rights and strengthening their political-institutional arrangements, such as the role of parliaments (Biagi 2022).

The perspective that we intend to examine seeks to depolarize the view between the North and the South of the Mediterranean, also regarding the influence of religion in the relations between the two shores. Studies on the involvement of the European Union in the use of religion in international relations with the southern Mediterranean only confirm that secularism is still the main framework to which Europe refers in its foreign policy, even if it is increasingly being discussed (Wolff 2019). In the post-secularization paradigm, religion is one of the options influencing the vision of society (Habermas 2008), even in conflict with other worldviews to affirm traditional values (Stoeckl 2016).

This engagement in the religious sphere is primarily motivated by security and stability concerns, which lead Europe to prefer relations with religiously moderate partners, also through interreligious and intercultural dialogues. At the same time, the religious argument is used to reinforce the oppositions between the two sides. It is thus used by Europe as a marker of identity and culture, which stigmatizes Islam as contrary to the affirmation of individual rights, and it is used by the countries of the southern Mediterranean, which identify Europe, at the same time secular and Christian, as the perpetrator of imperialist and colonial wills.

Once again, the season of Arab uprisings represents a crucial transition. Hoffman and Jamal have already reconstructed the role of religion and the emergence of two counter-narratives. While the first argued that the uprisings were led by secular and liberal segments in rebellion against theocratic regimes, the second claimed instead that the uprising population was religious and followed a “mosque-to-square” paradigm of participation (Hoffman and Jamal 2014). These same scholars, however, concluded that individual religiosity had a far greater impact on participation in the Arab uprisings than did the communal practice of attending the mosque. That is, a picture of religious citizens far from passive emerges, as reading the Qur’an was found to be a motivator for individual political participation against social injustice. Hoffman and Jamal help us to understand that in reading the events of the Arab Springs, the religious factor should not be excluded from the demands of democracy and, consequently, that personal religiosity has a role to play in claiming social and political rights that are not the sole prerogative of secularism.

In this sense, to adopt an intersectional perspective also means to concretize the post colonial gaze of and on the Mediterranean: to identify mutual influences, it has been argued, means to think of the Mediterranean as a space to be studied beyond geographical boundaries (Proglia 2016). This means avoiding the temptation of essentialist readings on both sides of the Mediterranean, and instead seeing the Mediterranean as a space of possibil-

ity, as a space that, according to the canons of intersectional hermeneutics, is always represented by the paradigm of *et/et* and no longer by that of *aut/aut* (Collins and Binge 2016).

2. Women's rights under attack

Addressing the issue of affirming women's rights in the Mediterranean is one of the most powerful tests of what has been argued so far. Not surprisingly, the study of women's agency can demonstrate that women's rights are under attack in an overarching way, transcending territorial boundaries and linking seemingly distant contexts. In the same way, the struggles of women's movements for the affirmation of democracy and the rule of law are transversal, since they are also fundamental elements for the affirmation of rights that are more closely related to their gender dimension.

In this regard, religion plays a very specific role, according to a double binary, that of potentially affirming gender rights or, conversely, of severely restricting them.

There is certainly nothing new about the debate on the role of religions and cultures in affirming women's rights. Already in the last-1990s, Susan Moller-Okin, in her famous contribution to thinking about the legitimacy of multicultural theory, pointed out that gender and especially sexual discrimination have their roots in all cultures and religions, in all latitudes (Moller-Okin 1999). While Okin recognized a special role for the feminist movements that emerged in the West had the power to limit gender discrimination in their own legal frameworks, in other cultural contexts patriarchal, including religious, roots were prevalent against the recognition of gender rights.

In fact, in recent years, women's autonomy and rights taken for granted have come under general attack at the global level. It is also well known how this attack takes place even in Western democracies, where the religious argument is used to limit gender rights. This happens both through the use of religious actors by populist political forces, especially the so-called Global Right (Bob 2012), and through the use of the typical instruments of democratic regimes, namely the legislative and the judiciary. Several legislative interventions and court rulings have sought to limit women's rights, starting with reproductive rights. Such interventions are influenced by and reflect illiberal governmental tendencies, including patriarchal or conservative religious arguments (Mancini 2022). However, what several scholars of the gender-illiberalism nexus have argued should not be forgotten when making such arguments: Western political and legal institutions are inherently exclusionary and discriminatory towards women. In this re-

gard, even the most liberal regimes have been associated with the difficulties women face in moving beyond the private sphere, where the recognized role of the family defined women's space for action in the world (Boogaards and Pető 2022). The question of the relationship between gender and religion is by no means secondary from this perspective either. On the contrary, the privatization of religion that is an inherent result of secularization exacerbates the gender divide, allowing the issues most closely related to sexuality and family roles to remain outside the public sphere and governed by rules that are far removed from the ideals of equality and freedom proper to liberal democracies (Mancini 2020). With the re-politicization of religion, women's bodies become a shared sacred space around which essentialist and ahistorical communities ally against perceived ultraliberal drifts (Spini 2022). In this logic of inversion of spaces and meanings, it is paradoxical how illiberal right-wingers take up the arguments about the freedom and emancipation of Western women, proper to feminist movements, in order to set them against the alleged religious and cultural discrimination proper to non-Western political regimes (Spini 2017). The instrumentalization of the fight against the Islamic headscarf in Europe is perhaps the most striking example of this (Ferrari 2022). Here, as elsewhere, the gender discrimination of non-Western women has been transformed into a cultural war on Islam.

However, even in these particular cases, we need to think about how the various anti-veiled measures implemented in the context of the European state and by the European supranational tribunal are itself an enduring feature of liberal-leaning governance (Mancini 2019).

Essentially, women's bodies and their agency constitute a battlefield uniting liberalism and illiberalism throughout time. Discussions about social and political roles and rights for women are indeed culture wars.

It is not trivial to consider that illiberal theories of anti-genderism also offer their own particular epistemology of human rights in the economy of our discourse, in which the different interpretations of human rights and, in particular, gendered ones, have been studied by the legal and political systems of both shores of the Mediterranean (Annicchino 2017). Specifically, the movements under discussion seek to refashion a new image of human rights based on natural concepts and traditional values. In the context of the movements of the illiberal religious right in the United States, the goals of Agenda Europe, a network of hundreds of organizations present in over 30 European countries, include "colonizing human rights", or imposing the ideas of ultra-conservative religious movements through the language of human rights (Walters, Kapur and Graff 2019).

In this sense, relations with the international bodies responsible for

guaranteeing human rights, starting with the European Convention on Human Rights, but also including international treaties, play an essential role. In particular, due to its territorial scope and relative projection in geopolitical relations in the Mediterranean region, the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence deserves special attention.

The impact of the illiberal politics of the global right, as recently noted by Nora Fisher-Onar, affects the dichotomy of our reading of the relationship between the global North and South. Through this lens, we see one key Eurocentric assumption broken. This is the idea that religion belongs to the private sphere, while the public sphere is ruled by a pure secular logic. As this assumption collapses, the underlying bias with which systems in the Global South are viewed, where the relationship between state and religion is more porous and responding to different understandings of the role of religion in the public sphere, is also exposed (Fischer Onar 2022). In fact, the ongoing overarching attack on gender rights makes it clear that even in the West, religious references in political dynamics are more than existent, thus putting the sphere of religious presence in the public space on the agenda. This is no longer a fictional opposition between an imaginary secularized West and a religiously imprisoned global South, but rather a common theme that must be addressed universally, taking into account the different latitudes.

3. Beyond secularism, recovering the public role of religion

Adopting an intersectional view of women's agency in the Mediterranean also means assuming that women are themselves intersectional subjects. Indeed, the intersection of multiple identities and social factors is capable of restoring the multiplicity of dimensions of subjectivities and requires protection tailored to this complexity, as legal and sociological theories of intersectionality have taught. In this sense, the particular national context, which must be studied from time to time, and how it affects women's existence, cannot be ignored when analyzing women's agency between the two shores of the Mediterranean.

Similarly, the role played by religion in the social as well as the purely individual context needs to be considered. From this point of view, women are not exclusively passive subjects in their relationship with religion. Rather, they develop with and within the religious context a role that is by no means marginal. Here again, there is a historical contrast between the northern and southern Mediterranean. As Rosi Braidotti has effectively pointed out, historically, European feminism, in the study of the relation-

ship between gender and religion, has developed a somehow agnostic, if not overtly secularized, position based on the criticism of religion as authority (Braidotti 2008). This strand of thought is historically opposed to affirmative feminist thought on religion, which also developed in the European context and was quite diverse within that context. When reconstructing it, Sabine Grenz identifies a number of streams. A first group focused on studying women's lived experiences and practices within religious groups, with an emphasis on everyday experience. The second school, emerging in reaction to the anti-Muslim policies of the 1990s and strengthened after 2001, dismantles the opposition between the secular and the religious, and thus between the secular, superior West and the religious, especially in the Muslim majority states, acknowledging the role of secularism and religiosity in defining the balance of power. A third trend is feminist theologies, which propose and use new interpretations of religious texts and theological doctrines to initiate a religious transformation from within, with implications for the vision of society at large (Grenz 2023). Overcoming the rigid binomial of religiosity and secularization seems to be the common denominator of all the cases described. Consequently, the interpenetration of these two spheres cannot be ignored when describing women's subjectivity and political and social contexts.

The revision of the religious and secular opposition for a more complex and therefore more realistic vision includes the revision of the relations between North and South. It is in this sense that the intersectional approach, which Grenz herself uses, is of great help. Indeed, Grenz argues that the secular (when not overtly anti-religious) approach is not sufficient to overcome systems of oppression of women within religions, we would add, at any latitude. In the same way, intersectional and postcolonial studies are crucial to the analysis of religions from within (Grenz 2023).

The approach just described challenges the notion of a secularized North and a religious South in our reading of this volume. The complementarity of the secular and religious spheres is essential to the dialogue between the two shores of the Mediterranean. It proposes, with an inclusive research gaze, questions that constantly cross the secular-religious border, and thus the geographical and ideal border between the two shores of the Mediterranean. This is, in turn, the new paradigm of post-secularization, postulating the juxtaposition of different options and, as in our case, forcing us to rethink both the secular and the religious realm (Spini 2017, Braidotti 2008). In this respect, the analysis of the role of women in religious contexts is of particular importance. As is often stated, religious contexts are not only the place where women are subjugated, but also the place where women assume roles that sometimes spill over outside religious contexts, directly into civil society.

Although it is not self-evident that these roles of women within religion are necessarily conducive to women's advancement (Mahmood 2005), in our case we are particularly interested in exploring those aspects of women's active participation within religion that lead to women's advancement.

4. Women's religious agency

To do so, we use the concept of agency as it applies specifically to religion, which is the thread running through all our considerations. Using agency to describe women's status within religion, especially traditional religion, has a long history. One commonly accepted definition of agency stresses the positive activation of women's agency within situations of structural discrimination or widespread cultural sanctioning (McNay 2000). In this sense, Burke highlights the importance of the use of the concept of agency specifically in the religious context. Indeed, descriptions of women belonging to religious communities generally lack the concepts of autonomy and intentionality inherent in agency (Burke 2012).

Women's agency within religions can be based on different approaches, as is the case with different strands of religiously inclusive feminism. Here, we must broadly recall Orit Avishai's reconstruction, which inspired later studies that fit our argument (Avishai 2008, Burke 2012, Granz 2023). Two opposing approaches seek a synthesis or a third path. The first approach to agency, that of religious women who seek change and challenge the religions to which they belong, can be called "resistant". The second refers to agency based on "empowerment". This is the attitude of women who seek to reinterpret religious doctrines in order to achieve a better status.

In the overall economy of the discussion, one cannot help but notice how the first type of agency again reacts on the dichotomous view of the world: North vs. south, west vs. Islam, secular vs. religious views. While we should not deny the absolute essentiality of gendered acts and behaviors of resistance, even within religions, the mere adoption of the model of resistant agency runs the risk of perpetuating non-inclusive or stigmatizing attitudes. This would have repercussions, for example, for women who adhere to traditional religious teachings. According to this view, they would lose their status as actors and we would no longer know how to read their adherence to traditional religious conceptions. Once again, we can take the example of the Islamic veil as a model. Following such a direction runs the risk of no longer understanding and reflecting on women who wear the veil. Also to describe the second approach, that of agency based on empowerment, the example of the Islamic veil can provide interesting insights.

Most useful for our purposes is the study of the use of the veil in West-

ern contexts, where the choice to wear the veil has both a domestic political meaning, as a response to a culture of sexualizing the female body, and a foreign policy meaning, as a response to Islamophobia and the assertion of Western hegemony over the Global South (Maske 2017).

A third way is what in different contexts is called “conforming agency” (Burke 2012) or even “lived religion” (Granz 2023) or simply “active agency” (Mahmood 2005). In all these cases, the agency of religious women has to do with “doing religion” (Avishai 2008), with the practices, i.e. the everyday, that reveal the quality of women as actors in the different ways they respond to religious precepts and traditional practices. In this sense, women’s agency is manifested in their ability to have formal and informal roles within the religious community; to express their knowledge and thus their authority in a field of human knowledge; and to modulate the religious meaning of things through their actions. Thus, looking at the religious and the role of women within the religious reveals something broader: the existence of multiple visions of the religious and the role of people in their definition. By influencing worldviews and relationships with power, this vision has a socially transformative effect. This is even more true in those national systems in which religion is a factor in determining personal status and liberties, whether personal, as in religious freedom, or communal, as in freedom of assembly.

Consequently, the sites of women’s action cannot be ignored in this declination of agency. That is, without ignoring their contradictions, it must take into account the contexts in which they move. In this sense, if it is true that the assertion of women’s rights was born and developed in the secularized West, the category of postsecularization is helpful for us in order to define a new meaning of agency.

In this sense, recovering the sphere of religion is essential for understanding the link between women’s rights and subjectivity in relation to contexts where religion has particular significance for both individual and social existence. Recalling the contributions of the thinkers we have already mentioned, denying women’s agency, even in religious terms, means considering the multiplicity of political grammars (Mahmood 2005, Giorgi 2016). Here we add, again using intersectional hermeneutics, that women’s agency in the religious context is itself a situated concept, taking into account the intersection of different grounds. It is in this situatedness (Rebughini 2021) that the religiosity of women stands out, now experienced as an inseparable part of their cultural condition, but not necessarily as a harbinger of subalternity, now experienced as a political claim. This situatedness should address the relationship between religiosity and secularity within the political, social, and state context.

At Kelsy Burke’s invitation, our analysis would not be complete without

considering the areas of women's nonagency in relation to religion. By this we mean cases in which women are unable to act intentionally in religious contexts and cases in which they are unable to act as subjects with their rights recognized.

5. Women's rights at the crossroads of religion and politics

In this regard, we want to add the other side of the reflection on women's agency in relation to the religious. In addition to analyzing women's roles within religions, it is important to examine women's roles outside them, whether they belong to religious or other faith groups, or whether they have become secular. The question we want to ask, especially when the relationship between the secular and the religious in the state sphere is not clear, is how women's agency operates in relation to public power.

In that sense, the religious realm may not be an exclusive of women, but women do experience the consequences of religious influence in the public realm. Women do experience the consequences of religious influence in the public sphere, for example in relation to the universal affirmation of the principle of equality, both in the sphere of family law and in dealings with public authorities and public law. In such cases, the issues are not limited to women's rights; they are issues of democracy (Bras 2007).

Once again, and with particular caution, we must recall how much the contexts of northern Mediterranean countries have traditionally affirmed the principle of equality and parity. We know, however, how much these achievements had to struggle to become effective and how much they are still in process. We're also aware of how the West is at the center of a reverse revolution on such rights, with a new generation of conscientious objection emerging in the legal, political, and social realms (Mancini 2018).

Turning our gaze further south, we must analyze the intersection of multiple factors that give rise to the condition of gender inequality. Using a comparative approach, Lisa Hajjar identifies the interplay of at least four factors: the Shari'a, state law, domestic violence, and the struggle for women's rights. All of these factors are at the mercy of one main factor that is at the root of them all: the relationship between religion and the state. (Hajjar 2004). Although Hajjar's research focused specifically on the interaction of these factors regarding the issue of domestic violence, we believe the paradigm she identifies has universal value when applied to all women's rights issues. The problem is well known and concerns the use of Shari'a as a normative reference for family law and as a socio-cultural reference for religious values. In terms of the role of the state, the question arises of how far the legal framework can ensure appropriate forms of protection, or how

far the cultural and religious environment can condition the effects of such protection.

The litmus test for the health of women's rights is the implementation of international treaties, beginning with the CEDAW, and the implementation of the 1995 Beijing Platform (Raday 2012). The effectiveness and impact of these instruments depend on their cultural legitimacy and the way they are embedded in local culture and legal consciousness, as Sally Engle Merry has pointed out (Merry 2003). While international law enshrines gender equality, social and cultural practices still differ. Thus, the conflict may take the form of the clash between the application of law and international norms, following the familiar path of the clash between the universalism of human rights and the particularism of cultural rights, among which religious traditions play a special role. (Merry 2008). This is true of all models of state-religion relations in the southern Mediterranean, with differences, whether we are talking about the communitarizing model, in which personal and family status are regulated by a system completely separate from that of the state, or the nationalizing model, in which the boundaries between religious law and state law are more fluid. The way out of the opposition between women's human rights, perceived as threatening community disintegration, and religious rights seems to follow two directions.

The first refers to the progressive involvement of women in interpreting religious norms. In this sense, depolarization comes from within, recognizing both women's own membership in the religious culture to be reformed and the need for cultural change to establish equal legal norms. Saadia Yacob's research on the feminist engagement with Islamic law (Yacob 2019) is of particular relevance in this regard. Regardless of the different approaches that have emerged since the 1970s, it is important to note that the methodologies inherent in feminism throughout the ages have contributed to the reinterpretation of Islamic law, sometimes with a typically Western view, sometimes with a view from within. In any case, the various approaches agree that the biases in the application of Islamic law to women are due in large part to the way it has been interpreted over time by political and cultural orientations. Asma Lamrabet, on the other hand, notes that once women gain access to the textual sources of the Quran, with special reference to the ethical standards, it becomes clear that it is not the spiritual message that is in question, but rather the human readings that were layered over time and fostered by social and political conditions that were hostile to the inclusion of women in the sphere of religious knowledge (Lamrabet 2015). As Dina Mansour wittily notes, the reinterpretation of personal status laws, unburdened by the bearers of political and cultural

biases, opens the door to a reading of norms in light of international human rights norms (Mansour 2014).

The second relates to the political participation of women in the setting of state norms and, ultimately, in state power. The season of the Arab uprisings was marked by strong participation by women. Women, along with youth, were the unquestioned protagonists of the revolts, and their agency to claim rights and demand dramatic changes in social conditions was especially evident. The Arab Springs had the capacity to trigger a series of legislative reforms. However, as is well known, this prominence has not been followed by a political commitment at the institutional level to the same extent. On the contrary, women have been the main victims of the counter-revolutions. This has been done with the intention of re-establishing the traditionalist social and legal norms. Even in the case of post-revolution regimes, the vision to recognize women in leadership positions was missing.

This is not to say that women did not exercise their agency. On the contrary, as political and social events in the broader MENA region in recent years have shown, several authors have drawn a perspective of women's activation that began before the Arab Springs and continues well after (Stephan and Charrad 2020). It is largely a struggle that needs to continue and that is undergoing cultural change in all the contexts under consideration.

6. The contributions of the volume

This interdisciplinary volume explores the condition of women and women's agency between the two Mediterranean shores. Without neglecting the relationship between the countries and with the region as a whole, the adopted approach favors a reading of the individual contexts of the countries under examination. Identifying commonalities in the condition of women in relation to political and religious factors was the idea we wanted to pursue. From this point of view, in order to analyze the subject in its own scientific context, the authors analyzed the contexts, at national or regional level. In this sense, the volume offers a broad and epistemologically oriented perspective towards a dynamic type of intersectionality between different fields of knowledge, assuming that the female condition is the result of different factors.

Debora Spini focuses on the relationship between religious identity and women's political agency in a post-secularizing context. Drawing on post-colonial and intersectional theories that have transformed the feminist worldview, the author invites a rethinking of Western modernity. In this

sense, Spini offers tools for reflecting on how to depolarize the North-South divide.

Alberta Giorgi analyses the rise of religious feminism on both sides of the Mediterranean in the wake of major political events such as the Arab Spring and the rise of a new wave of intersectional feminism in Southern Europe. In both cases, a new form of activism is emerging that involves rather than excludes religious women. Focusing specifically on Southern Europe, Giorgi's contribution analyzes the function of the migration process from the southern Mediterranean to the North Shore, focusing on the category of Muslim women. Their presence has challenged established religious practices and opened up new possibilities for activism.

Still looking to the North Shore, Barbara Pozzo focuses on the role of European private law in enabling women to participate in the multiple contexts of public space. European legal history has paid particular attention to the role of women's political rights. However, the role of private law in defining women's public status has been neglected. Pozzo draws a line between constitutionally recognized political rights and private law, which, while continuing to justify the inferior role of women in the private and family sphere, also has the potential to be used in universal feminist battles, as in the case of the right to inherit the maternal name. In the affirmation of women's agency, private and public spheres are thus interpenetrated.

As noted throughout this introduction, religious studies is also an inward look at describing female agency. Letizia Tomassone's contribution focuses on feminist theology, particularly that of Italian mainline Protestantism. She analyzes in particular the changes that queer theologies have brought to theological discourses of and about gender. As queer theology and fluid gender identities emerge, so do potential alliances in struggles against patriarchy.

Feminist theology is also making inroads into the Catholic world, beginning with the Italian world, but not exclusively. Cristina Simonelli reflects on the ongoing debate about the role of women in the Catholic Church and the perspectives it opens in related areas, such as sexual orientation and masculinity. This is especially relevant for ecclesiological considerations on the role of women and thus on ministry. In such cases, the risk of linking gender and roles is particularly high, especially when this connection is sacralized.

Another reflection of the northern coast, Albania. Diana Çuli describes the process of women's political and social liberation which accompanied the country's transition to a democratic system and a market economy. From this point of view, the author shows how the collapse of the political and social system affected the condition of women. In this transition, reli-

gion has also played a role. From a country where it had been outlawed, Albania has become a country where religion is no longer private but public. Drawing on her political experience, Çuli focuses on the struggles against gender-based violence and the long road of reforms toward gender equality that has yet to be achieved.

Leïla Tauil's contribution on *féminismes laïques*, secular feminisms and Islamic feminisms in Muslim contexts, with a focus on the Maghreb, opens the reflection on the southern shore of the Mediterranean. Starting with their historical reconstruction, the author traces the main lines of the three schools of thought and focuses on the current period after independence in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. The author then focuses on the current post-independence period in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, analyzing specifically the movements to overturn the codified personal and family status derived from Islamic law and based on the subaltern role of women.

Erika Biagini and Paola Rivetti offer a reflection on the role of Islamic women in the Arab uprisings as an expression of their agency, focusing on Egypt, with crossovers to Tunisia and Morocco. While the Arab uprisings highlighted the role of women as agents of social change, the subsequent period is often referred to as the Arab Winter because of the role of Islamist movements in the post-revolutionary period. This has tended to overshadow the reflection on Islamic women in the uprisings, which has instead been of particular significance. The authors analyze women's agency in religious and political activism, while also highlighting Islamist women's organizational and mobilization skills.

Asma Lamrabet's reflections are based on her exceptional knowledge of the situation of women in Morocco, tracing the lines of its evolution, starting with the important family law and constitutional reforms that have taken place since the mid-2000s. Lamrabet emphasizes the necessity of a reformist view of religion in order to dismantle the instrumentalization of religious discourse, and the necessity of an evolving and progressive reading of religion in order to achieve gender equality in Moroccan society at large.

Souad Ghaouti Malki and Leïla Boussaid examine the situation of women in Algeria and the difficulties encountered by the texts of public law in recognizing the principle of equality between men and women. Yet the history of women in Algeria, starting with the anti-colonial battles, is a history of participation in public life. The liberal turn that took place at the end of the 1980s also affected the economic situation of the country and the participation of women in the free economy, with an under-representation of women in economic life. To enable women's free participation in the management of the *res publica*, it is essential to overcome the obstacles created by the traditionalist approach to gender roles.

Women's political participation and gender equality are also the focus of Jinan Limam's contribution. She reflects on the situation in Libya, beginning with the marginalization of women under the Qaddafi regime and ending with women's participation in the 2011 revolution. Through a legal and political analysis, the author argues that Libya's bumpy, violent, and unfinished transition has also had an impact on gender equality in the midst of territorial fragmentation, tribalism, and the rise of religious extremism. During the transition, the situation of Libyan women deteriorated sharply, and the use of violence by militias and fundamentalist groups increased. Women's rights are indeed a dividing issue between conservative and more liberal positions. However, a debate on the status of women and their participation has become possible during the transitional period. In this regard, Libyan civil society has played a fundamental role, with advocacy for women's rights finding plenty of space, including in the process of drafting the new constitution.

The situation in Türkiye today is the focus of Jean Marcou's reflections on the role of women in the country's political life and in the life of political parties. Long considered a model for the Muslim world, Türkiye has become a country where female rights and emancipation are threatened. The religious inspiration of the policies of the Turkish leader Erdogan, according to which the relationship between men and women is not based on the principle of equality but on the principle of complementarity, limits the rights of women in the public sphere. This is particularly evident with regard to women's historically acquired rights, such as the right to vote. The future of Turkish women can therefore be seen from the perspective of religion.

Finally, Rita Chemaly addresses the impact of sociopolitical laws and practices on women's agency in Lebanon. In describing the structural discrimination faced by Lebanese women, the author analyzes the specific situation of the lack of civil codification of personal status issues. Family law, including women's rights in relation to their husbands and children, is actually based on religion with separate courts. In conclusion, the author reflects on the future of Lebanese women, beginning with recent advances in women's movements and political action.

The long journey between the two shores of the Mediterranean offers a richly articulated picture of women's agency and the status of women's rights, where social and political circumstances are conditions for the establishment of full gender equality.

The role of religions is generally perceived to be an obstacle to the implementation of these rights. A closer look, however, reveals that religious women have an essential role in the affirmation of evolutionary and progressive religious visions. Women themselves are the agents of transfor-

mation, acting thoughtfully at the intersection of private and public life, of religion and public power. Preserving this dual dimension seems to be the privileged way to affirm truly inclusive and affirmative policies.

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