

## The Vatican and the Birth of Anti-Gender Studies

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This special issue of *Religion and Gender* comes as timely and highly relevant contribution to the ongoing debate on the origins, characteristics and effects of the current pushback against 'gender'. Sarah Bracke and David Paternotte have put together five texts that scrutinize different aspects of the Roman Catholic Church's engagement with 'gender' in specific national contexts (Argentina, France, Italy and Poland) and internationally. The contributors convincingly argue that even though the opposition against 'gender' can be attributed to many sources and engages different groups, including Protestant, Muslim as well as non-denominational actors, the development of anti-genderism has been driven mainly by the Vatican and informed by the Roman Catholic Church's key theological invention: the theory of the complementarity of the sexes. By tracing the development of anti-genderism as an ideological position and effective rhetorical device, the authors show how the anathematization of 'gender' emerged and spread through the world. The case studies included here cover only a fraction of national contexts in which this trend is present, yet they suggest that the spread of anti-genderism is uneven (for example while it has been widely used in France and Poland, it has not become a prominent discourse in Argentina, despite the strength of the Catholic Church there). Moreover, they suggest that so far the anti-genderist movements achieved relatively little in terms of changes in legislation. Even though in some cases opposition against 'gender' led to mass mobilizations, it did not result in blocking and outvoting progressive regulations (as evidenced by mass demonstrations against same-sex marriage in France, which was nevertheless introduced by the government).

Arguably, one of key contributions of this special issue lies in de-naturalizing the Catholic Church's position on 'gender'. Stronger in some national contexts, almost non-existent in others, opposition to 'gender' is neither universally embraced by Catholics, nor flows naturally from the Church's theology. The contributions offer an overview of the ways in which the Roman Catholic Church's mobilization against gender theory unfolded over time, pointing to some continuities between the previous waves of religiously grounded anti-feminism and the current one, but also showing that there are distinctively new developments and strategies employed. For example, Sara Garbagnoli points out that distinction between 'good' and 'bad' feminism, and 'authentic' and 'false' emancipation dates back to post-WWII period, while Eric Fassin

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proposes to view the current controversy in the perspective of a recurrent conflict between essentialist and social constructionist paradigms, which can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle. At the same time, authors show that the theological developments and the conservative political mobilization under the banner of opposing 'gender' is a new phenomenon within the Church, a reaction to the advances of the feminist and LGBTQ movements, the development of gender studies and policy changes, including anti-discriminatory legislation and equality measures introduced by specific states and transnational institutions. Mary Anne Case, who examines how the Vatican employs the theological anthropology of complementarity of the sexes, demonstrates that even though this doctrine is portrayed as a longstanding Catholic orthodoxy, it is a fairly recent invention, formulated by Popes (Pius XII, Jan Paul II and Benedict XVI). She argues, that it is 'a mid-twentieth century innovation imported into Catholicism at a theoretical level through the work of converts such as the married former Protestant Dietrich von Hildebrand and at a more pastoral and political level by members of the Catholic hierarchy such as Pope Pius XII trying to reconcile commitments to separate spheres and the equality of the sexes' (156). In other words, the Catholic Church's claims to represent views on the relations between women and men that are 'natural' and not 'fabricated', 'authentic' but not 'constructed,' and 'timeless' rather than 'newly invented' could not be further from truth.

Contributions to this issue convincingly argue that the concept of 'gender ideology' has been invented and popularized by the Church because it encapsulates a number of critical issues, linking vital concerns regarding gender order, family and sexuality, which for a long time were not necessarily a part of the same conversation, for example the issues of women's reproductive rights and homosexuality, marriage and education. There is an interesting discrepancy, however, between the authors as to the relevance and possible effects of this development. The editors assert, somewhat optimistically, that the emergence and promulgation of the concept of 'gender ideology', in all its opposition to gender as a concept, nevertheless firmly relies on and reproduces the analytical work that gender as a category does connecting dots between sexuality, family-formation and reproduction (148). Other scholars, however, seem to be less positive pointing to disastrous effects of strategic conflation of gender theory and 'gender ideology'. Garbagnoli argues that this conflation 'constitutes a single and frightening enemy, it assembles religious and non-religious actors [...] and, finally, it produces moral panic in the public sphere that subsequently allows to influence legislators and block juridical and social reforms' (192) aiming to counter discrimination against minority groups. So far, such effects have been observed in countries ruled by authoritarian regimes, such as Russia, where anti-gender rhetoric and moral panic around the alleged threat posed by homosexuals led to penalization of anti-discrimination education addressed to minors and de-penalization of domestic violence. Today, as the right-wing populist movements gains momentum in Europe and elsewhere, we can expect such initiatives to emerge and possibly win in many other countries.

Analyses of the Catholic Church's position on 'gender' confirm the view that anti-genderism is not just a set of 'post-truths' disseminated by Catholic media outlets, but a coherent worldview and an area of expertise. Although none of the authors focuses solely on the relation between religious and scientific arguments and language, the special issue offers fascinating insights into how

anti-genderism legitimizes itself 'scientifically'. In the words of Bracke and Paternotte: 'these oppositions to 'gender' can be read as projects of alternative knowledge production' (144). Anti-genderists not only insist that gender studies scholars are ideologues rather than scientists, as shown by Garbagnoli, but also claim that their religiously grounded claims are in fact scientific. At its core, anti-genderism represents 'a deeply pessimistic and consistently anti-modernist narrative of Western intellectual, cultural and social history' (Graff and Korolczuk 2017). Profoundly suspicious of existing academic institutions, anti-genderism has built up its own sources of legitimacy, a body of knowledge and its own pantheon of intellectual celebrities with academic titles, many of them women. A close reading of texts by exponents of transnational anti-genderism, including Gabrielle Kuby and Marguerite Peeters – or their local versions such as Polish anti-genderists Father Oko or Marzena Nykiel – reveals an ambitious intellectual project, one that at times verges on conspiracy theory, yet strives to present itself as rational and rooted in science. Books are published, lectures are given and academic conferences are organized at institutions of higher learning, online courses and workshops are offered. Anti-genderism is spread through various channels, both religious and secular: it became a vast project of education which has led to the development of an alternative public sphere, perhaps even an alternative civil society. Just like second wave feminism established itself in the academic world in the form of gender studies, the present wave of anti-feminist activism seeks to legitimize itself by establishing anti-gender studies. The scale of this educational effort is remarkable. For example, in Poland during 2015 alone the Association of Catholic Families organized over 120 meetings for parents concerned about the 'sexualization of children' through 'gender' education in parishes all over Poland (Duda 2016: 37). Though the proclaimed aims are moral and the highest authorities tend to be religious, anti-genderism claims to be scientific. The key experts – some local, some international, often endowed with scientific titles – engage in their texts and lectures in endless mutual citation, a vicious circle of self-legitimation, which not only lends credibility to unfounded claims that may otherwise seem absurd but often verges on collective plagiarism. Anti-genderists have established an intellectual circuit alternative not just to gender studies or feminism but to contemporary social sciences and cultural studies. As Kuhar has observed 'the Church's discourse (and its public appearance) seems to be 'secularizing': the Bible is substituted by science and the Church itself by civil society proxies' (2014: 7). Thus, I would argue that we should view anti-genderism not as stemming from the lack of knowledge and understanding of what gender studies and gender theory stand for, as suggested by Father Krzysztof Charamsa, but rather as reflecting an ambitious plan to establish anti-gender studies and new social sciences, based on a different set of fundamental truths about human nature, sexuality, family and society.

Focusing on the role played by the Roman Catholic Church in the current wave of the opposition towards 'gender' allows for a deeper and more nuanced analysis of the concept of gender and its usefulness for religious authorities. Embracing such a perspective, however, one risks discussing the theological and ideological differences as detached from the actual global geopolitical power struggles. As evidenced in previous studies, 'gender' became a highly effective discursive tool mobilizing different groups, including non-religious people on a transnational level, effectively linking different right-wing parties in Europe (Korolczuk 2014;

Kováts and Pöim 2015). Arguably, anti-genderism is at its core a political rather than a religious movement, affected by realignments and tensions in international politics (Graff and Korolczuk 2017). While Bracke and Paternotte make a convincing argument explaining why the contributions to the special issue do not include the analysis of the role played by other denominations, the collection would have benefited from a detailed analysis of the connections between the Catholic and non-Catholic actors and the ways in which religiously grounded critiques of 'gender ideology' spread also through non-religious channels, influencing public debates and political decisions. Garbagnoli's analysis of the similarities and continuities between the anti-gender mobilizations in Italy and France shows that transnational connections may play crucial role in spreading moral panics around the concept of 'gender' and anti-discrimination legislation. Thus, they clearly deserve more scholarly attention.

Finally, contributing authors point to the fact that anti-genderists attempt to amalgamate different progressive actors including activists, academics and policy-makers, presenting them as 'the enemy' to be combated by all those who fear for the future of family and children. This leads to an important question concerning the ways in which such amalgamation may facilitate mobilization and cooperation of different individuals and groups identified as 'genderists'. So far, the dominant paradigm of identity politics on the left (and right) appears to be based on a continuous boundary work, which leads to the exclusion of those who 'are not exactly like us'. This trend seems to have a powerful centrifugal effect on the left and the feminist movements, resulting in ever-increasing fragmentation and endless internal struggles over what constitutes the core of the feminist or left identity. Should we expect that the attack on different groups which allegedly propagate 'gender ideology' may have a centripetal effect on these groups, exposing what they have in common and preventing some of them from alienation in search for the lowest common denominator?

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