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WOMEN AND RELIGION

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Review of Márta Bodó (ed.), *Women and Religion*, (Cluj: Verbum, 2009).

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One of the things most of us tend to appreciate more and more in today's academic happenings such as workshops, conferences or symposia is their warm, natural and low-keyed, yet based on arguments tone.¹ The echo of this modest and open tone was one of the first strong impressions which seized my attention from the introductory pages of the book entitled *Women and Religion* edited in English by Márta Bodó and published in Cluj-Napoca by Verbum Publishing House, in 2009. The group of articles collected together in this book may well stand as the public chronicle of a symposium which gathered competent professionals, active in the academic field of Feminism and Theology. The symposium, made public also by disseminating its results through this book, was one of the regional conferences organized every two years by the European Society of Women in Theological Research (ESWTR)² in the Eastern and Central European countries. There are at least four reasons which explain the option of the European Society of Women in Theological Research to organize conferences in this part of the world. The first argument is a social one and resides in the fact that these countries had - and still have, as some of the articles from the book demonstrate pertinently - a tradition of highly patriarchic social structures. The second, religious one, strongly related to the first, consist of the fact that if in the past, within these religious traditions, it was unusual for a woman to become a researcher in the field of theology today, even if there are few cases of women theologians, it is still very hard for her professional voice to "gain" respect within the male-dominated academic field of theology. But even if this respect is "earned" in the field of theology, a woman cannot, by any means, hold a position in church structures. The third argument is a historical one and it is related to the fact that these countries have suffered at least forty years of political oppression which manifested also by marginalizing not only religion's social role and its functions, but also the field of theology as such. The last reason for organizing this series of conferences in this part of Europe is a rather political or strategic one, based on the disparity between the ways in which in Western Europe one can already talk about a tradition of women's involvement in scholarly religious research and the fact that in countries from Central and Eastern Europe women were excluded from theological research. Therefore, the necessity to reduce this "clash" of social and academic practices regarding the roles of women within a unified Europe, combined with the need to mark and celebrate the recent integration of Bulgaria and Romania in the European Union, the 2008 conference of the European Society of Women in Theological Research took place in Transylvania and its theme was: *The Contribution of Women in Shaping the Spiritual Features of a Unified Europe. Past Experiences that Shape the Present and the Future*. In other words, the collection of papers presented within this framework, heterogeneous in perspective, approach or even methodology, aim all at conceiving a "modus operandi" for a public statement regarding the ways in which female perspectives in the

field of theology - but not exclusively in this field - that would contribute to shaping and developing a common European spiritual identity. By offering viewpoints from various fields of research, the articles comprised in this book cover a whole range of themes regarding women's relation with religion. Thus, the discussions on different religious representations of women in art, i.e., iconography, or in hagiography, the researches on women's new religious movements such as Brahma Kumaris³ and the critical views on the status of women in religious structures and in theological scholarly research, all offer a wide feminine actual perspective upon religion and spirituality. Delicate matters such as the involvement of women in the study of religions and theology, the status of certain ideologies such as feminism in certain countries from the European Union or the lack of synchronization between the Western European practice and phases of feminism and the East European ones are critically and courageously debated and outspoken throughout the book. As religion and spirituality are amongst the elements which form the core of European history without which one cannot truly grasp the concept of a unified Europe, the increase of women's involvement in theological matters, religious studies or even religious issues, together with the improvement of the status of feminism in Eastern European countries are at stake here. Therefore, the authors are trying to build together bridges that could open up the possibility for shaping a more inclusive, non-discriminatory and spiritual European future, but also for creating an academic platform which would contribute to making clear and sharing the idea that religion and spirituality "always have to do with gender"⁴. The fact that throughout the book almost exclusively feminine voices are to be heard comes as a manifest which aims at reinforcing the idea that religion and spirituality should today be treated as 'gendered' concepts by a more sustainable power of spirituality.

From a thematic point of view, the book is structured in four parts which aim at counterbalancing the above mentioned four reasons which have generated the need to create a European Society of Women in Theological Research (ESWTR) and to organize a series of conferences starting with 1998 in the Eastern and Central European countries. Hence, firstly, if a whole range of religious traditions stopped women from acceding to any academic position in a mainly male dominated theology, today one should witness the transformations of such an obsolete form of spirituality. Therefore, two of the studies present in the book, that of Éva Vörös, entitled "The Feminine Side of Postmodern Spirituality and 'The Funtinel Witch'"⁵ and that of Milka A. Hristova entitled "Brahma Kumaris - a Women's New Religious Movement"⁶ offer a perspective upon the feminine face of contemporary spirituality. Through a deeply personal account of experiencing the lecture of one of the most appreciated Hungarian novel called 'The Funtinel Witch'⁷ and written by Albert Wass, the Minister Éva Vörös draws upon the story of a 19-20th century illiterate

Romanian shepherd girl and distills a considerable amount of feminine energy and spiritual power “to create and destruct, to initiate into the limits of life”⁸, to embellish solitude and exile through imagination and belief. Through her structured study, Éva Vörös establishes a literary character into a role-model of feminine strength which could work out perfectly for women of today’s world. For the author considers that this model might encourage postmodern women “to step out of spiritual infancy to womanhood (...), to tap into our own resources and live a life of freedom, where our inner compass always shows us the right way”⁹.

Hence, if Éva Vörös, through her theological and literary interpretation of the feminine figure central to the novel written by Wass, offers a model of feminine spiritual powers, Milka A. Hristova sets forth a complementary model of organizational spirituality.

Milka A. Hristova uses the description of the history, of the organizational structure of Brahma Kumaris religious movement¹⁰, of its philanthropic and educational international projects, of its spiritual practices in order to offer European women of different religions and denominations a model of social and spiritual activities that could help them plea in the support of women in each of their own societies, and enjoy the plenitude of life, without favoring their public achievements over their private spiritual beliefs.

Secondly, the historic argument according to which despite their leftist, i.e., communist past, feminism has no history in certain countries from Central and Eastern Europe is critically attacked in the studies of Mihaela Frunză and Liana Galabova in view of the necessity to create a new European society and from the perspective that feminism in East-European countries has to be aligned, somehow, to that of Western Europe. Mihaela Frunză’s work demonstrates clearly that, paradoxically, in certain countries from Eastern Europe feminism has stored a negative connotation that ranges from “ignorance to condescendence, stereotypical rejection, rejection on a nationalist basis or traditionalism”.¹¹ To prove this negative connotation of feminism, the author offers, throughout this article, a large account - punctuated with witty, ironical remarks - of the antifeminist attitudes publicly manifested, without any reasonable explanation, all along the post-communist period by notable Romanian intellectuals. The author’s critical analysis offers a few reasons which could explain the antifeminist attitudes within the Romanian context. The political explanation resides in the fact that feminism is associated with left-wing ideology, unacceptable for some intellectuals whose intellectual creed is anticommunist narration, while the social-religious explanation affirms that Romania is still dominated by patriarchal relations that are still encouraged by the Christian Orthodox religious tradition. The deeply rooted gendered-biased practices within this religious tradition also seem to explain a series of reasons for which women are still absent from the theological discourse, or, in the case there

were women theologians in countries from Eastern Europe, they feel obliged, as Liana Galabova would further argue, “to become church or secular activists, in order to reveal to the world the hidden value of their own field of study”¹².

But, regardless of the fact that theology was/is predominantly practiced by men/priests and if there are, yet, examples of women theologians, still, they are considered intellectuals preoccupied with religious studies, according to the author, another major element contributes to perpetuating this male dominated theology and that is public education. Mihaela Frunză brings forth, here, the case of an NGO activist named Emil Moise, who, working for an association for human rights, has pleaded for applying and making clear the church - state segregation in Romanian public schools, by protesting against the display of religious symbols (icons which might have a discriminatory potential for women, or crosses which might be discriminatory for children of other religions) in those schools.

The question of the roles women could and should assume in theology and/or even in church matters in a secular environment such as the contemporary European one turns Liana Galabova’s study¹³ towards the same issue of the need of a non-discriminatory education in the so called Orthodox countries. The author’s insightful work constitutes a plea for making educational steps towards adequately accepting the equality of men and women in all aspects of life in the above mentioned countries. An adequate acceptance of gender equality in those countries, would first mean to accept the fact that their regional or national traditional church mentality cannot stand anymore, in the context of already globalized believers, as an excuse for inequality, and second, that public opinion has to acknowledge gender equality „formally, publicly, visibly, respectfully and legally”¹⁴. Thus, through those two thematically connected and complementary studies, one of the main purposes of the conference and of the book – that of discussing critical issues regarding feminism and women’s involvement in theology in post-communist, Christian Orthodox countries has been achieved.

Thirdly, if the tradition of patriarchal social structures historically reduced women’s propensity for gaining any significant social or leadership role, today the social and psychological approaches concerning the conflict between women’s public and private roles are to be discussed. That is why two of the articles comprised in the book: “Not Afraid to Be Different – Marija Jurić Zagorka and Josip Juraj Strossmayer”¹⁵ written by Gordana Barudžija and “The Work - Family Conflict According to “New Feminism”: a Psychological Approach”¹⁶ presented by Justyna Melonowska thoroughly discuss this issue. The article of Gordana Barudžija represents an apologetic reflection upon the life and work of Marija Jurić Zagorka, one of the women who could stand as a model of determination, professionalism and spiritual power even for contemporary East-European

women. She was among the first activists who fought, in this part of Europe, for a just evaluation of women, for their emancipation, for their freedom to choose a public role over private duties. As the first women political journalist in South-East Europe, her work enjoyed first the appreciation of her Western professional colleagues, remaining to wait for the acceptance of some of her national professional fellows almost until the end of her life. The same issue regarding the conflict between family and professional activity is raised by Justyna Melonowska's critique of the so called "New Feminism" promoted by Pope John Paul II. Confronting the prerequisites of this "New Feminism" with empirical data emerged from socio-psychological inquiries, the author demonstrates that the ideas promoted by this new feminist trend, which affirm that women who choose to completely dedicate their lives to their profession, thus sacrificing maternity and family life, in order to achieve self-accomplishment aloof themselves from Christ's path are gender biased. The question that is to be answered in this article is the following: Is raising children a path of Christ only for women? Starting from a conception of socially constructed gender roles, the author clearly argues that researches in psychology and sociology show clearly that in the families where men assume a traditional patriarchal role and are less involved in raising children and family activities, as fathers they feel more guilt when they are not accomplishing their professional duties than they feel when failing their roles as family roles.

Last, in order to compose a "(w)hole"¹⁷ picture of the topic of women and religion, an artistic shade completes it through three articles: "Female Roles and Female Sainthood. The Example of Medieval Hagiography"¹⁸ written by Csilla Gábor, "Harmony in the Sacred Space" created by Cristina and Lucian Sabău-Trifu, and Lucreția Vasilescu's article entitled "The Mother of God in Romanian Orthodox Iconography"¹⁹. Csilla Gábor's text tests the limits of using the same type of sources proposed by historical or literary accounts of the saints, or of repeating the same methodology when devoting to the scientific study of the saints and their veneration. Hence, the author chooses an inspired alternative when practicing hagiography within the framework of this article. Thus, in order to depict how the roles of contemporary women relate to the experiences of feminine saints of the past, she chooses to dig into the "everyday utterances which inform about the very style in which these saints live their spiritual life"²⁰. The author finds that the presentations of female saints of the Medieval Hungary lack all those negative features associated with women in the Middle Ages, and, moreover, the protagonists of the legends concerning the Árpád -dynasty appear as autonomous, purposeful, charitable and initiating roles.

While Cristina and Lucian Sabău-Trifu's work²¹ deals with the expressions of spirituality within a kind of liturgical art. Thus, the article aims at explaining the spiritual aim of using art, i.e., artistic objects in

some Transylvanian sanctuaries, furniture or even iconographic representations, in order to create an atmosphere that invites to prayer, Lucreția Vasilescu's study shows the way in which Christian Orthodoxy uses icons or Christian symbols such as crosses to enable a spiritual, or, as Paul Evdokimov explained so well, an experience of mystical communion of prayer by making references to God's presence and to a well established order²². Thus, the icons replenish the prayers with images which express the Christian teachings and dogmas. The icons representing the Mother of God analyzed throughout the article reflect the theological principles of Orthodoxy, but they also speak of the spiritual life of their (anonymous) painters and of the way of faith assumed by Romanian women along history. In conclusion, through this interdisciplinary approach of the issue regarding women and religion, the reader gains a deep experience of moderate and balanced feminism that could be useful not only for professionals acting in the field of theology and feminism but it could also be pleasant for people who need to temperate their prejudices concerning feminism and/or wish to learn more about it.

Notes:

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² For more information about the European Society of Women in Theological Research (ESWTR), please visit the official web site: <http://www.eswtr.org/> (Last consulted in May 2011).

³ Milka A.Hristova, "Brahma Kumaris – a Women's New Religious Movement", in Márta Bodó (ed.), *Women and Religion*, (Cluj: Verbum, 2009), 68-76.

⁴ Márta Bodó (ed.), *Women and Religion*, 10.

⁵ Éva Vörös, "The Feminine Side of Postmodern Spirituality and 'The Funtinel Witch'", in Márta Bodó (ed.), *Women and Religion*, 55-68.

⁶ Milka A.Hristova, "Brahma Kumaris – a Women's New Religious Movement", in Márta Bodó (ed.), *Women and Religion*, 68-76.

⁷ Albert Wass, *A funtinelli boszorkány* (Marosvásárhely: Mentor, 1999).

⁸ Márta Bodó (ed.), *Women and Religion*, 62.

⁹ Márta Bodó (ed.), *Women and Religion*, 62.

¹⁰ For more information about Brahma Kumaris New Religious Movement, please consult the official web site: <http://www.bkwsu.org/> (Last consulted in May 2011).

¹¹ Mihaela Frunză, "Who and Why Is Afraid of Feminism in Romania?" in Márta Bodó (ed.), *Women and Religion*, 42. For another analysis within the same thematic field, also see, Mihaela Frunză, "Who's Afraid of Feminism in Romania? Misconceptions, prejudices, stereotypes", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, Vol 5, No 14 (2006): 83-88.

¹² Márta Bodó (ed.), *Women and Religion*, 79.

¹³ Liana Galabova, “Theology as Means of Expression of Women between Eastern Orthodox Christian Tradition and Its Secular Environments of New European Societies”, in Márta Bodó (ed.), *Women and Religion*, 76-85.

¹⁴ Márta Bodó (ed.), *Women and Religion*, 78.

¹⁵ Gordana Barudžija, “Not Afraid to Be Different – Marija Jurić Zagorka and Josip Juraj Strossmayer”, in Márta Bodó (ed.), *Women and Religion*, 23-30.

¹⁶ Justyna Melonowska “The Work - Family Conflict According to “New Feminism”: a Psychological Approach” in Márta Bodó (ed.), *Women and Religion*, 30-41.

¹⁷ See Leonard Swidler, *After the Absolute. The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 18.

¹⁸ Csilla Gábor “Female Roles and Female Sainthood. The Example of Medieval Hagiography”, in Márta Bodó (ed.), *Women and Religion*, 11-21.

¹⁹ Lucreția Vasilescu, “The Mother of God in Romanian Orthodox Iconography” in Márta Bodó (ed.), *Women and Religion*, 85-103.

²⁰ Márta Bodó (ed.), *Women and Religion*, 19.

²¹ Cristina Sabău-Trifu and Lucian Sabău-Trifu, “Harmony in the Sacred Space”, in Márta Bodó (ed.), *Women and Religion*, 21-23.

²² Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: a Theology of Beauty* (Oakwood Publications, 1990), 179.