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MARIANNE HEIMBACH-STEINS, JUDITH KÖNEMANN,
VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL (HG.)

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KONTEXTUELL – INTERSEKTIONAL

THEOLOGY: BIOGRAPHICAL – CONTEXTUAL –
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Marianne Heimbach-Steins, Judith Könemann
und Verena Suchhart-Kroll

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Biographical Intersection of Religious, National, and Feminist Identity in Socialist and Post-socialist Croatia

JADRANKA REBEKA ANIĆ

Abstract

Der vorliegende Beitrag ergündet biographisch, inwiefern die Kategorien Nation, Glaube und Gender die Autorin, eine katholische Ordensschwester in Kroatien, in der gesellschaftlichen Mehrheit verorten und zugleich die Grundlage für ihre Diskriminierung darstellen.

Im ersten Teil stellt die Autorin zwei gesellschaftliche Ordnungen dar, in denen sie gelebt hat: die sozialistische (1945–1990) und die demokratische (nach 1990). Dabei betont sie besonders die Ambivalenzen des kommunistischen Regimes gegenüber der Emanzipation von Frauen: In der sozialistischen Gesellschaft lebten Frauen zwischen gesetzlich garantierter Gleichberechtigung und der Ablehnung traditioneller Genderrollen im öffentlichen Leben durch das kommunistische Regime sowie der Bewahrung derselben Rollen im Kontext der Familie. Die sozialistische Gesellschaft, die den Frauen gesetzliche Gleichberechtigung und öffentliches Wirken sicherte, drängte zugleich Ordensschwestern in das Private und an den Rand der Existenz. Vor diesem historischen Hintergrund geht der Beitrag der Frage nach, inwiefern sich gläubige Frauen in einer ‚schizophrenen‘ Situation zwischen kommunistischem Regime und Katholischer Kirche befanden: Das feindliche kommunistische Regime, das Frauen als gleichberechtigt betrachtete, nahm den Ordensschwestern das Recht, in der Öffentlichkeit zu wirken. Die Katholische Kirche, die dieses Regime beschuldigte, Menschenrechte mit Füßen zu treten, räumte den Frauen keine gesetzliche Gleichberechtigung ein.

Im zweiten Teil stellt die Autorin auf Grundlage ihrer eigenen Biographie die Intersektionalität von marxistischer Ideologie, Religions- und Genderzugehörigkeit dar. Die Verschränkung von Gender, Berufung zur Ordensschwester und der Beschäftigung mit feministischer Theologie hat eine Außenseiterinnenposition nicht nur in der Katholischen Kirche, sondern auch im säkularen Feminismus zur Folge. Am Beispiel der von ihr gemeinsam mit der muslimischen Theologin Zilka Spahić Šiljak (Bosnien und Herzegowina) gegründeten Online-Schule *Feminismus und Religion* zeigt die Autorin auf, wie ein interdisziplinärer und intersektionaler Zugang Dekonstruktionen genderspezifischer Stereotype ermöglichen kann, die noch immer ein Gleichberechtigungshindernis auf globaler und lokaler Ebene darstellen.

This chapter is a biographical study of the ways in which the categories of nation, faith, and gender situate the author, a Catholic nun in Croatia, in the social majority and, at the same time, form the basis for her discrimination.

In the chapter's first part, the author describes two social orders in which she lived: the socialist one (1945–1990) and the democratic one (after 1990). She highlights the ambivalence of the communist regime towards women's emancipation: Under socialism, women lived between legally guaranteed equality and the communist regime's rejection of traditional gender roles in public life, as well as the preservation of these same roles in the context of the family. Socialist society, which guaranteed women equal legal rights and public activities, at the same time pushed religious sisters into the private sphere and to the margins of existence. Against this historical background, the chapter examines the extent to which religious women found themselves in a 'schizophrenic' situation between the communist regime and the Catholic Church. The hostile communist regime, which regarded women as equals, deprived religious sisters of the right to work in the public sphere. The Catholic Church, which accused this regime of trampling on human rights, did not grant women equal rights under the law.

In the chapter's second part, the author uses her own biography to illustrate the intersectionality of Marxist ideology, religion, and gender. The intertwining of the author's gender, vocation as a nun, and engagement with feminist theology has led to an outsider position not only in the Catholic Church, but also in secular feminism. Using the example of the online school Feminism and Religion, which she co-founded with the Muslim theologian Zilka Spahić Šiljak (Bosnia and Herzegovina), the author shows how an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach can enable the deconstruction of gender stereotypes that continue to be an obstacle to equality at global and local levels.

The conservative Catholic portal Bitno.net often publishes headlines about mothers who have given or raised a child with a spiritual vocation and/or a saint (e.g. Bitno.net 2022). My identity and life have been marked by two events related to religion: being baptized and joining a monastery. Neither of these events followed the model according to which a mother or parent has *given* or *raised* Christians or children with a spiritual vocation. Unlike other children who were baptized immediately after birth, I was baptized when I was one and a half years old because my parents were not married in the Church. My grandmother took me to be baptized with her friend. Apparently, when the priest poured holy water on me during the ceremony, I ran away. They had to catch me again before they could complete the ritual. Entering the monastery was the opposite. My mother could not come to terms with my choice of vocation, so I fled to the monastery after graduation. I had the feeling that I needed to do something and that I could do it best as a nun. I did not know what my task would be, only that I felt I was embarking on an adventure with God. In the following, I present the context in

which my adventure with God took place and some intersections that I consider important to my life.

1. Important intersections in my life

I was born in 1960 in the Republic of Croatia, one of the six republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia where the Communist Party was in power (from 1945 to 1990). Social distinctions based on race and class did not play an important role in my life: I was born a white woman in an environment where there were almost no people of other skin colours. My parents were working class, but their income was good enough that there was no significant difference between me and other city children. Nevertheless, the social characteristics that placed me in the social majority played a certain role in my life, they were nation, religion, and gender. Specifically, I was a Croatian in Croatia, a Catholic in a country where Catholics were the majority¹, and a woman in a country where there were more women than men.² However, belonging to the majority did not always mean that I was not discriminated against. I shall give you some examples. First, something about the social context regarding nation and religion and then gender equality.

1.1 Nation and religion

The Communist Party had similar attitudes towards both national and religious issues. Religion was considered the main ideological tool used by the exploiters in the fight against the oppressed masses and against the liberation of man. By eliminating class, religion was supposed to disappear (cf. Nikolić 2017: 60), and implementing the program of *brotherhood and unity* from the existing nations³ was supposed to create a new *Yugoslavian* national identity. National and confessional divisions were considered dangerous for state stability and security and were relegated to the private sphere (cf. Nikolić 2017: 62). However, these differences and

- 1 According to the 2021 census, 78.97 % of citizens in Croatia declared themselves Catholic, which is less than the 2001 census, when 87.97 % of citizens declared themselves Catholic (cf. Državni zavod za statistiku 2022).
- 2 According to the census from 2021, 51.5 % of Croatian citizens are women and 48.5 % men (cf. Rogić-Hadžalić 2021).
- 3 The most numerically represented were Serbs, Croats, Macedonians, Slovenes, Montenegrins, and Muslims. Muslims were officially recognized as a national identity during the session of the League of Communists of Bosnia and Herzegovina on 26 January 1968. Since 1994, the national identity of Muslims has been officially defined by the term 'Bosniak.' For further details on this complex issue see Xavier 2009.

divisions did not disappear with these actions, they were only strengthened by becoming identified with national and religious affiliation.

In its fight against religion, the communist regime offered a new, communist, non-theistic religion based on the idea of *brotherhood and unity*. They also promoted atheism with its own symbols (hammer and sickle), rituals (admission to pioneers, youth, etc.), and saviours (Josip Broz Tito and others) (cf. Radić 2001; Nikolić 2017). According to sociologists, there was no conflict between secular ideology and religion in Croatia, but a conflict between two religions: one Christian and the other secular/Marxist. Exclusivity and extreme intolerance reigned between these two completely different religions and the conflict had similar effects on both sides: it strengthened identity and encouraged collectivism. The Church responded to the extreme collectivism of Marxist socialism with collectivist Catholicism (mass pilgrimages, etc.) (cf. Jukić 1994: 365). Identity and collectivist Catholicism also prevails in modern, democratic societies and is particularly accentuated in discussions about the so-called “gender ideology” attributed to the Marxist worldview and seen as opposed to Christianity (cf. Anić 2015b).

The communist regime did not always have an equal relationship with the Catholic Church. The first phase, which lasted from 1945 to 1966, was marked by trials, imprisonments, and murders. In addition, diplomatic relations with the Holy See were terminated, Church property was confiscated, the Catholic Faculty of Theology was excluded from the University of Zagreb, the religious press was banned, religious education was banned from schools, and educators, police, and the army were forbidden to access the Church, etc. Since it was dangerous for the laity to participate publicly and openly in the Church, the Church reduced its activities to clerics, bishops, and priests. However, with the signing of the Protocol between the SFR Yugoslavia and the Holy See in 1966, the situation changed to some extent: Catholic publishing houses were founded, scientific dialogues were conducted between Marxists and theologians, and ecumenism began to develop between Catholics and Orthodox, etc.

With its declaration of independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, the Republic of Croatia began building a democratic society, and the position and role of the Catholic Church in the country changed significantly. Thanks to the international treaties formed between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia in 1997 and 1998, the Church entered many areas of the state system: education, the military, and the health system. The agreement on cooperation in the field of education and culture stipulated that “the values of Christian ethics”⁴ should be considered in “public preschool institutions and schools, including universities” (Sveta Stoli-

4 *Christian ethics* means, in this context, traditional Catholic moral teaching, specifically Catholic sexual morality.

ca 1996, Art. 1.2.), which called into question the very constitutional definition of the Republic of Croatia as a secular state (cf. Marinović 2017: 400).

In Croatia, there is no public theology, but ‘theology’ has a presence in public. This implies that the hierarchy and the vast majority of theologians do not engage in public discussions in a dialogical manner. Instead, they dispatch statements seeking the respect and legalization of traditional Catholic morality in areas categorized under the politics of morality. These areas include contraception and abortion, medically assisted fertilization, the rights of same-sex couples, sex education in schools, ‘gender ideology’, gender stereotypes, and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, etc. (cf. Bekić 2013: 20). Some theologians attempt to influence public opinion, even resorting to pressure and threats. For example, some theologians threaten to deny any politicians who voted for the ratification of the “Istanbul Convention” the right to the sacraments. Such behaviour reflects a refusal to acknowledge the pluralistic nature of Croatian society and a reluctance to accept that they do not hold a monopoly over truth, science, legislation, etc. There is an expectation that the Church should retain the rights and roles it had in the pre-modern era and seems to be continuing to act in the same way, uninterrupted by the socialist period.

1.2 Gender equality

With the rise of the Communist Party, women in Croatia were guaranteed constitutional and legal equality for the first time, and they were also given the right to vote for the first time. However, legal equality did not mean factual equality in either socialism or in the later democracy. In both periods, women faced very similar problems: the feminization of lower-paid occupations, lower wages compared to men, a higher share of registered unemployment, and less opportunity for advancement, etc. (cf. Leinert-Novosel 1997; Blažanović 2021; Glogoški 2022). The Communist Party had a complex attitude towards women that incorporated both emancipatory and traditional values. Emancipation values (equality, economic independence, etc.) were necessary to implement the goals of the revolution and establish a new order, while traditional values were used to maintain the stability of the established order. The image of the *new* socialist woman was created by adding emancipatory values to the existing traditional beliefs about natural female characteristics (cf. Sklevicky 1996: 55–57).

In summary, it could be said that women in Croatia during the socialist era lived on the cusp of legally guaranteed equality together with the ruling ideology’s public rejection of traditional gender roles and the preservation of the same ideology in the family and moments of crisis in society. The issue of women’s emancipation was also situated within the framework of the conflict between the Com-

munist Party and the Catholic Church. Women's entry into the labour market was interpreted within the Church as a communist means of struggling against the family, the people, and the Church itself. Yet, in fact, both the Communist Party and the Catholic Church condemned and rejected feminism. For the Catholic Church, it was an ideological tool that the Communists used against Christianity, while the Communist Party rejected feminism as an outcome of Western, bourgeois, liberal ideology (cf. Anić 2015a: 3).

Socialist society, which provided women with legal equality and public activities, pushed nuns into seclusion and to the edge of existence. After the Second World War, their property was confiscated and their participation in educational, health, and other institutions was prohibited. As a result, they were suppressed and excluded from public life, and due to poverty, they could not access education. To survive, they had to work in the households of Church institutions. They rationalized their low-paid physical work in these institutions by accepting the concept of the "indirect apostolate", that is, they considered it a sacrifice for the education of future priests. This situation was the reason why my mother could not accept my entering the monastery. She did not want me to be a priest's maid, but an educated, economically independent, and free woman (cf. Anić 2015a: 286–296). My perspective was different. Although I was aware that the sisters worked intensely, mostly on various household chores, I never perceived them as priests' servants. Nor did I consider women in the Church as subordinate. I did not focus on that aspect. Instead, I saw myself as a catechist working in a less affluent part of Croatia. Most frequently, I envisioned myself working in impoverished villages, interacting with children, and giving them sweets.

At the same time, while women were legally equal in secular society, in the Catholic Church, as legislated in Canon Law in 1917, women were considered equal to minors and mentally challenged people. Being a female and a nun meant being in a schizophrenic situation: The hostile, communist regime recognized women as fully-fledged people yet, at the same time, deprived nuns of the right to act in public. However, the Catholic Church, which fought against that regime, accusing it of trampling human freedoms and rights, did not recognize women's legal equality.

After the democratic reforms, an increasing number of nuns and laywomen were employed in Church institutions in leading roles. These were women who did not discuss women's rights and did not engage with feminist and gender theology (cf. Anić 2019). Nuns became independent by opening their own institutions in accordance with the charisma of communities. However, this process was not without difficulty. For example, there was resistance to the renewal of employment contracts that would have provided them with better working conditions in the parishes. This resistance was caused not by the financial situation of the Church, but by the desire to keep the position and role of nuns as it was

in the socialist era. Nuns were expected to remain inexpensive labour available twenty-four hours a day.

The Church hierarchy still avoids the issue of gender equality, as evidenced by the recently held Church synods⁵ in which the issue of the position of women was not even mentioned (cf. Anić 2019: 876). Rather, the Church follows the same principle the Communist Party did. Just as women were not an issue for the Communist Party who were only concerned with the question of the working class, women are not an issue for the Catholic Church in Croatia, the Church is only concerned with the question of the laity. The resulting attitude is the same. When the workers' issue, that is, the issue of the laity, is resolved, the issue of women's equality will also be resolved.

This concludes my presentation of the complex socio-ecclesiastical context in which I grew up and the intersection of national, religious, and gender issues. In the following, I present some sketches of my life that exemplify this intersection.

2. Intersection biographically

I experienced the intersection of Marxist ideology and national and religious affiliation within my own family. Some members of my extended family were atheists and members of the Communist Party, indeed some were persecuted for their anti-communist and nationalistic views, and one great-grandmother was Orthodox (a Serb from Croatia). In being exposed to these intersections, I learnt that there are different views of the world and that I wanted to get to know them. My parents always emphasized that it does not matter who is which nationality or religion, the most important thing is whether they are a good person.

In the socialist era, parents only spoke about national issues under controlled conditions because there was a danger that they would be accused of being nationalists and end up in prison. In such situations, I understood the value of inner freedom and the powerlessness of the regime to control it. The experience, after the democratic reform, of being able to speak about my nationality without fear made me sensitive to the LGBTIQI community's demand for the right to express their identity publicly.

Although both in the former Yugoslavia and modern Croatia, national and religious identities merged so that, for example, Croats are considered Catholics and Serbs are considered Orthodox, for me, nation and religion have always been separate. Christianity was more important to me than nationality. In addition, I always thought of myself as a Christian first and only then as a Catholic. I saw

5 Synod of the Archdiocese of Zagreb (2002–2018) and the Diocese of Đakovo and Srejem (1998–2002).

Christianity as freedom. Maybe because I saw it as a poor, persecuted Church for the entire socialist period, it reminded me strongly of the Church of the earliest Christian times when being a Christian was dangerous and Christianity was proclaimed through the testimony of living. I decided to become a nun in such a Church. Only after the democratic reforms, during the revitalization and repoliticization of religion characterized by fundamentalist theological views, did I have the feeling that I did not belong to the Church but a Catholic sect. It was as if someone was imposing a Catholic 'corset' on me that was suffocating me.

As a child, I did not always perceive the conflict between the Marxist and Christian religions as a conflict. From my current perspective, it was, for me, sometimes two parallel worlds and sometimes an intersection of two worlds. As an example of when they felt like parallel worlds, I cite the sacrament of the first Communion that we received in the Church and the reception of Tito's pioneers at school. Adults interpreted these rituals as an attempt to replace the need for religious rituals with Marxist rituals. However, for me as a child, these were separate events: being a pioneer meant nothing more than occasionally wearing the prescribed uniform; being a Christian was an ideal that I wanted to live. In contrast, what we learned in school and what we learned in religious education did intersect. For example, in the fifth grade of elementary school, our teacher was of the view that Jesus was not God but an ordinary revolutionary. Although I was not able to defend my belief with arguments, I stood up and contradicted him. This intersection of two interpretations was what challenged me to get to know my faith better and to look for a way to make it understandable both to myself and to those who do not believe.

I connected what I learnt about brotherhood and unity at school with the religious teaching that all people are children of God. I especially liked that everyone in the class, regardless of nationality, religion, or gender, had a passive and active right to vote. Voting was based on the principle of *one person, one vote*. However, gender equality and voting according to the principle of *one person, one vote* was later the source of my problems in the Church and religious community. My advocacy for these principles was interpreted as the result of my indoctrination into communist ideology.

While growing up, I did not experience gender-based discrimination, neither in my family nor at school. The topic of gender equality was imposed on me from outside. As a nun and theologian, I was often asked what I thought about the emancipation of women and as I had not yet experienced discrimination, I answered that inner emancipation was crucial for me. I later learned that this is not enough.

Some priests asked my superiors about the purpose of my studies at the Catholic Faculty of Theology and advised them to enrol me in the Catechetical Institute, which at that time, was attended almost exclusively by nuns. The superiors did

not accept this because they believed that the community needed theologically educated sisters. However, being a woman and a nun affected the quality of my studies. I wanted to learn foreign languages because there was not enough theological literature in the Croatian language. My superiors demanded that I learn to play the piano instead because I might need it to work at a parish. It was only in the third year of my studies that I managed to enrol in a German language course. Unlike the male theology students, who went abroad during the summer and studied foreign languages, I went to work in a Caritas home for the elderly in Germany. The sisters from my community who worked there generated an income that provided important support for communities in Croatia and Africa.

The key event that prompted me to engage with theological anthropology from the perspective of gender was the realization that women were not considered full images of God until the twentieth century. I found this out only after completing my studies in theology and reading literature in the German language. This was the beginning of my more serious involvement in feminist theology, in particular, in feminist theological anthropology, which I considered extremely important in the Croatian context due to entrenched gender stereotypes in both society and the Church. One of the problems I faced was a lack of literature. In the 1990s, I did not have access to the internet, and literature on feminist theology did not exist in the Croatian language. It was not easy and often, for financial reasons, it was impossible for me to get books from abroad. I did not even have the opportunity to attend a course in feminist theology. Until recently, there were no female theologians in Croatia to deal with feminist theology and I could not specialize in one area. Instead, I followed feminist literature from all theological branches (exegesis, church history, dogmatics, ethics, etc.). In addition, I tried to approach the topic of gender in an interdisciplinary way, that is, by following gender research in the fields of sociology and the natural sciences.

I started to feel gender discrimination after being awarded my master's and a doctorate in theology. After receiving my master's degree, no one knew what I should do as a Master of Theology. Most nuns graduated from the Catechetical Institute and went on to teach religious education in parishes. Nuns who studied theology mostly worked as secretaries in theological faculties and I could have taken a job like that too. There was no possibility that I might teach at the theological faculty. In Croatia, there was an unwritten tradition that the chairs at the theological faculties were divided between diocesan priests and monks. It was not an option to complain about such a practice because the unwritten rules could not be proven. Then after my doctorate, my theological feminist orientation became a further obstacle to getting a job at one of the theological faculties. Due to my criticism of John Paul II's gender model of complementarity and its theological interpretation, I was declared a feminist, a liberal, and a Protestant in Church circles.

Thanks to the enthusiasm of two theologians, during the academic year of 2010/2011, I was given the opportunity to teach an elective course “Women in the Church and Society” at the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Split as part of their doctoral studies program. At that time, I also published the book “How to Understand Gender? The History of the Discussion and the Different Meanings in the Church” (2011)⁶ with which I responded to the misunderstanding of the term gender in the Croatian Church. On account of that book, but also because he thought my topic could be better taught by a priest who had a doctorate on the new feminism of John Paul II, a professor of the faculty and a member of Opus Dei requested that I be banned from lecturing at the faculty. In response, the academic council of the faculty established a commission that was supposed to investigate whether my book contained dogmatic and/or moral errors. The commission did not find any errors and it was possible that the faculty may not have forbidden my involvement. However, I withdrew my involvement myself because I had no insight into the process that was being conducted against me. I felt alone and unsupported. Word spread that I was a gender ideologue and I was the subject of numerous attacks by Catholic anti-gender activists, theologians, and the hierarchy, but also by the sisters of my religious community. Some sisters proposed that the provincial superior should ban me from working and appearing in public, which she refused to do.

This intersection of gender, religious vocation, and the practice of feminist theology led to my informal excommunication from the Church. Few people and institutions dared to invite me to give a lecture. Female theologians who associated with me were made aware that they were under surveillance and that they should be careful about what they said and wrote. The consequence of this is that I cannot find collaborators in Croatia when I want to register for an academic project on a theological theme.

However, I am not only walking a fine line when it comes to the Catholic Church. I am also on the fringe of secular feminism. Secular feminists express gratitude for the topics I discuss but do not acknowledge a need for cooperation. The feminism that prevails in Croatia is a feminism that accepts the secular-religious divide. According to this division, religion is associated with irrationality and emotion, as well as with women and femininity, while secularism is associated with rationality, reason, and objectivity, as well as with men and masculinity (cf. Anić/Spahić-Šiljak 2020: 267). Accepting this dichotomy, secular feminists consider my work useful for promoting gender equality within the Catholic Church, but they do not see how it can be useful for a secular society. Yet, this is

6 This is the English translation of the Croatian book title to be found in the reference list.

not only my problem, and it is not only a problem in Croatia.⁷ This circumstance prompted my colleague Zilka Spahić Šiljak, a Muslim theologian and professor of gender studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and I to design the first online school *Feminism and Religion* in Balkan which approaches various gender topics in an interdisciplinary way and under the guise of the intersection of women's human rights, secular feminist and gender theories, the theological traditions of three religious communities (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and feminist and gender theology.⁸ We realized that such an intersectional approach is the best way to deconstruct gender stereotypes and the patriarchal asymmetry of power based on them, demythologize the process of equating the secular with the emancipation of women and religion with their subordination, and empower and connect women by promoting emancipation regardless of worldview and religious affiliation.

I have also experienced parallelism rather than intersection in some meetings with Western feminist theologians. Just as secular feminists perceived the anti-gender campaign as a religious issue detached from secular society, Western feminist theologians regarded it as a problem specific to theologically underdeveloped post-socialist countries, despite the fact that the anti-gender discourse was imported to Croatia from the West (cf. Anić 2015b: 18–19). For instance, at an international conference in 2011, I discussed the rise of fundamentalism and the anti-gender discourse in Croatia, emphasizing the necessity for a theological response to this discourse. As an example, I cited “Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions” (Pontifical Council for the Family (ed.) 2006) along with other documents from the Pontifical Council for the Family and books by anti-gender authors such as Gabriele Kuby. In response, I was informed that the “Lexicon” held no significant role in their theological faculties and Kuby was entirely unknown to them. They expressed regret about the situation in Croatia and the conversation ended without further discussion. The realization that the anti-gender movement is a transnational issue became especially clear after Europe was inundated with anti-gender protests in 2013.

3. What can be generalized from my biographical experience?

The topic of gender stereotypes and the interweaving of secular and religious elements in them is certainly a theological topic that I consider important in the

7 For more on the relationship between secular feminism and religious feminism see, for example, Llewellyn 2013; Anić/Spahić-Šiljak 2020: 265–270.

8 See the website: <https://ferskola2022.onlinebase.net/>

context in which I live and act. However, gender stereotypes are important at the global level too. For example, according to the Global Gender Gap Report 2022 (which includes data on 146 countries gathered in 2021), it will take another 132 years to close the global gender gap (cf. World Economic Forum 2022). Furthermore, the European Commission expressly refers to gender stereotypes as a cause of gender inequality in Europe (cf. European Commission 2022: 17–19; European Commission 2020: 5). The deconstruction of gender stereotypes should be an interdisciplinary and intersectional activity, since not only gender but also other social inequalities (race, class, etc.) are intertwined with them.

The deconstruction of gender stereotypes is also important because the anti-gender movement is essentially an anti-feminist movement that considers defending gender stereotypes an important goal. Their aim is to return women to their domestic roles and give men back their lost authority (cf. Marshall 2000: 100–117).

Gender stereotypes play an important role in the Catholic Church as well. They are not only the basis for the gender model of female subordination but also for the gender model of complementarity that still prevails in Church documents about women. A special problem is the transfer of the model of complementarity from the anthropological level to the ecclesial level that is expressed, in particular, in John Paul II's statements about the two dimensions of the Church: the apostolic Petrine (male, clerical) dimension of the Church is based on the apostles and includes the role of management, teaching and sanctification while the Marian (female, lay) dimension of the Church takes the Blessed Virgin Mary as its model for its role to receive, serve, and be obedient (cf. John Paul II 1988: no. 27; Anić 2015a: 281–286). In this way, historically developed hierarchical, inegalitarian Church structures are naturalized and presented as immutable. Although there are already enough critical theological works on these topics, they do not affect ecclesiastical legislation, thus, the issue of the abuse of epistemological power in favour of theological justification of inegalitarian gender models and the maintenance of exclusionary Church structures also arises as an important issue.

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