

"Sexual modernity": religions and the intimate sphere in contemporary times

Biennial conference of the Eurel network

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Argument

Our contemporary era is marked by changes in the relationship to sexuality - a term taken here in the broad sense of everything that relates to the 'sphere of intimacy' (Pelletier, 2005) - that can be grouped under the term 'sexual modernity'. Although these issues are intimate, they also have a strong collective dimension. E. Fassin¹ has proposed the concept of 'sexual democracy' to describe the politicisation of questions of gender and sexuality as democratic issues, against a background of equal rights and individual freedom. Progressively denaturalised, the order of gender and sexuality increasingly appears to citizens as a political order, open to contestation and debate. Faced with this paradigm shift, the established religions, which becoming culturally and politically minoritised in many Western societies, react in various ways. These reactions range from the inclusion of this new normative order in their culture and structures to forms of "ecclesiomy" (Ph. Portier)², i.e. reaffirmation of the superiority of the ecclesial or religious norm over the law or individual private choices, through pastoral arrangements that favour an adaptation of practices without taking the risk of modifying doctrines.

Several recent societal debates, particularly in the West, whether on same-sex marriage, surrogate motherhood, sexual violence, or recently on abortion freedom and trans-identity, have shown that although they are not new, the questions of the relationship between sexual ethics and religions must nevertheless be studied in the light of the social, scientific, political and legal developments of the last decade.

This colloquium proposes to examine the relationship between religions and sexuality in contemporary times. To this end, it aims at bringing together researchers from all disciplines who deal with this question, with the dual goal of sharing research results and possibly bringing out new perspectives or dynamics. The purpose is to take up the question of **the relationship**

¹ Éric Fassin, « La démocratie sexuelle et le conflit des civilisations », *Multitudes*, vol. no 26, no. 3, 2006, pp. 123-131.

² Philippe Portier, *La pensée de Jean-Paul II, La critique du monde moderne*, Paris, Éditions de l'Atelier, 2006.

between religions and recent social developments in the intimate sphere, mainly from three angles:

1°– Non-discrimination and sexual and reproductive rights

Western societies are increasingly incorporating the normative horizon of gender equality into their values - with varying degrees of effectiveness in putting it into practice. One of the areas in which this call for equal rights has the greatest impact on the sexual ethos is that of reproduction: whether it is a question of contraception, abortion or surrogate motherhood, for example, women remain concerned and involved in a different way. However, they do not always have a say in the matter, and there are major tensions between the demands for freedom and the positions of religious groups. How can individual religious freedom, the right to autonomy of religious groups and political decisions on non-discrimination be reconciled in different societies? What social and legal tensions can be seen at work, who are the actors, and what role do religious groups play here? How can the maintenance of patriarchal claims, which are common in religious groups, be combined with the implementation of women's sexual and reproductive rights?

2°– Contemporary evolutions of religious leadership

In societies where sexuality is now seen as a place of fulfilment, or even as the main stage of personal identification, and in the face of LGBTQI+ mobilisations and their success in terms of social and legal recognition, religious organisations have long been satisfied with questioning this growing social acceptance, or denouncing the effects of an acting minority on general norms. However, they have always positioned themselves as outsiders, as if homosexuality were not an issue that also concerned them. What does the new reflexivity produce within religious organisations, especially among religious leaders, in terms of subjectivity and modulation of discourse, caught as they are between the "constraint of publicity" (the need to defend the values of their institution both to the faithful and to non-believers³), and the very modern aspiration to sexual authenticity and individual fulfilment? How do religious institutions take this social evolution into account in their discourse and practice? How can we analyse the emergence of new practices of religious leadership (women imams, rabbis or priests, inclusive mosques, etc.)?

Moreover, in a normative horizon of gender equality, the 'patriarchy of power'⁴, as an effect and modality of male domination within institutions, is becoming difficult to defend explicitly, although it still shapes power practices to varying degrees within all institutions, including secular ones. Religious institutions, where this patriarchal dimension of the exercise of power is most often assumed, or even asserted, appear today all the more questioned as the liberal

³ Hélène Buisson-Fenet, « Comment l'autorité s'exerce. Les clercs catholiques homosexuels et la contrainte institutionnelle », *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, no 119, 2002, pp. 65-78.

⁴ Constance Lalo et Josselin Tricou, « "Si cet homme n'avait pas été prêtre..." Patriarcalité du pouvoir, script catholique et pédocriminalité dans l'Église », *Cahiers d'histoire. Revue d'histoire critique* [En ligne], 147 | 2020

democracies in which they are embedded adopt voluntarily 'femonationalist' postures⁵. Does this patriarchal framework of thought give rise to phenomena of defence of the religious institution, cognitive dissonance or paradoxical processes of emancipation? What does the massive awareness and indictment of the 'patriarchy of power' within religious organisations do in return to religious institutions: does it prompt a proliferation of defensive rhetoric, reforms, accommodations?

3°– Secular societies and religious civil societies confronting sexuality-related violence within religious apparatuses

Since the mid-1980s, cases of gender-based and sexual violence have been increasingly covered by the media in Europe⁶, indicating both their 'increased social disapproval' and the 'lowering of the resignation threshold'⁷ of the victims. As far as religious organisations are concerned, this growing media coverage has mainly focused on sexual assaults on minors by clerics in the Catholic Church and on their concealment by their hierarchy. This attitude of the institution now appears to be totally out of step with social expectations of prevention, recognition and reparation of damage. In the eyes of a secularised public in particular, it gives rise to scandal and demands for accountability from their leaders. How does civil society - believing or not - mobilise itself in the face of the religious apparatus and its resistance to reform? Do these challenges to religious apparatuses by their own followers increase the establishment of sexual democracy at the very heart of religious organisations or, on the contrary, do they give rise to heteronomic reaffirmations? In what sense do they contribute to the 'individualisation of belief'⁸, including among conservatives who, while advocating respect for legitimate authorities, are often as critical and strategic about them as progressives, if not more so? And how does the growing importance of non-believers influence these debates?

Sexuality-related violence exists in all religious groups. For example, 'conversion therapies' - aimed at correcting homosexuality or non-conforming gender identities - which are frequently discussed in relation to evangelical Protestantisms but also occur elsewhere, are increasingly disapproved of and are even debated in parliamentary arenas⁹. Do societies tend to encourage or restrict the denunciation of these practices? What social, political and legal support can whistleblowers find? What role do these scandals play in the general evolution of the relationship with religion and secularisation? Is there a political instrumentalisation of these events? And from a legal point of view, how does this question the limits to freedom of religion? Finally, what is the impact of 'sexual democracy' and sexuality-related scandals on state law and internal law of religions?

⁵ Sara R. Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights. The Rise of Femonationalism*. Durham : Duke University Press, 2017.

⁶ Boussaguet, 2009, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-de-science-politique-2009-2-page-221.htm>, et <https://www.cairn.info/revue-societes-et-representations-2016-2-page-59.htm#re41no41>

⁷ Nathalie Bajos & Michel Bozon (dir.), *Enquête sur la sexualité en France. Pratiques, genre et santé*, Paris, La Découverte, 2008.

⁸ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Le pèlerin et le converti. La religion en mouvement*, Paris, Flammarion, 1999.

⁹ Le Sénat adopte la loi interdisant les « thérapies » de conversion, décembre 2021, <https://www.publicsenat.fr/article/parlementaire/le-senat-adopte-la-loi-interdisant-les-therapies-de-conversion-191521>; voir aussi « Décembre 2021 : Thérapies de conversion », *Eurel*, <https://www.eurel.info/spip.php?article4067>

Call for papers

In order to discuss all these issues, the scientific committee of the conference is seeking contributions in the field of social and political sciences and law.

Proposals for papers (500 words max.), in French or English, accompanied by a short CV, should be submitted before **31 March 2023** via the conference website (sexual-ethics.sciencesconf.org). Responses will be sent by the end of May.

Papers may be presented in either French or English, the two official languages of the conference. Any accompanying documents (power point, handouts) will be in French if the presentation is in English, and vice versa.

Coverage

Accommodation (1 night) and meals will be paid for by the conference, while transport costs will be borne by the speakers. For students and young researchers without institutional affiliation, it may be possible to obtain travel assistance, to be confirmed in March.

Committee

This project is supported by the University of Lausanne and the Eurel network, which brings together specialists in the law and social sciences of religions throughout Europe (eurel.info).

Its scientific committee is composed of Francesco Alicino (LUM Casamassima University, Italy), Sylvie Toscer-Angot (University of Tours, France), Josselin Tricou (ISSR-University of Lausanne, Switzerland), Léopold Vanbellinghen (UCLouvain, Belgium), Anne-Laure Zwilling (CNRS - DRES, Strasbourg, France).