

BOOK REVIEW – REZENSION – RECENSION

João Fontes, Maria Filomena Andrade and Tiago Marques (eds.), *Gênero e Interioridade na Vida Religiosa. Conceitos, Contextos e Práticas* (Universidade Católica Portuguesa/Centro de Estudos de História Religiosa: Lisboa 2017)

The book presents itself as a compilation of eleven texts on interior experiences of religious women and men between the Middle Ages and contemporary times. It aims to bring together the notion of interiority and its relationship with gender. “Interiority” is connected with spiritual life and religious experiences. The authors quote Charles Taylor’s interpretation of interiority as a modern construct rooted in Augustine’s notion of *intus*, as “the location” of what a human being needs. According to Taylor, the journey into this “location” had been emphasised during Reformation and Counter-Reformation, when a clear distinction had been drawn between the interior world and the exterior world of things. The divide between domesticity (women’s domain) and public life (men’s domain) contributed directly to defining a “religion of men” and a “religion of women” within the same religious confession (the book deals exclusively with religious life within Catholicism). However, the editors are convinced that it is not enough to focus on sexual difference as the main concern of the various perceptions of religious interiority. Therefore, their main issue is to show how religion is shaped by gender (a social, political and cultural notion), and how gender shapes religious experiences. At the core of the book and its various chapters stands the view of women’s body as a body of submission, but also of empowerment. Cloistered women in various Portuguese and Spanish monasteries, queens and women with bodily stigmas in Europe (including Portugal), all submitted their bodies to suffering as a sign of their configuration to Christ’s redemptive suffering. It is obvious that spirituality, especially in the times of Counter-Reformation, had been focused on a sacrificial understanding of Christ’s salvation that emphasised not only His physical suffering, but also His suffering due to people’s sins, as if their sins represented a continuous crucifixion of Him. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern Age had been times of abyssal social divides between the poor and people of power. This

had a direct impact upon the way life had been lived and understood. Hunger, physical sacrifices and punishments were common. This should also be taken into account when reading the texts in the book dealing with self-imposed sacrifices, made especially by nuns. If the understanding of the way Christ saved humanity had been based upon His physical sacrifice at the cross, configuration to Him had also to take the same path of physical sacrifice, in order to expiate the sins of the world, and that which women considered to be their own sins.

However, in addition to presenting texts and registers of this radical sacrificial religiosity, the authors also propose a different interpretation of them. If religion institutions, authority, theology, piety, and liturgy had been performed or “organised” by men (as can be seen, for instance, in the authority clerical elements had over female monasteries during and after the Counter-Reformation), it seems to be a plausible hypothesis that women’s bodies had served as bodies of rebellion against an imposed masculine religion. Women, even if they had male spiritual advisers, saw, heard and configured themselves not to the Virgin Mary, but to Christ. They needed no mediator while having these mystical experiences: they spoke, heard and experienced in their own bodies the power of unification with their saviour, and this even imparted them with the authority to guide other people. Such is the case of Alexandrina Marina da Costa, a Portuguese woman who died in 1955 and had been considered holy, since, having suffered an accident while escaping from men who had wanted to rape her, she remained “tied to her bed” for 25 years. Women interviewed by the author of this chapter, Tiago Pires Marques, tell how she had even given advice to priests. The attempts by the male hierarchy to control women (as in the chapter dealing with the physical and psychological repression of Juana de la Cruz) did not seem to be able to control women’s “interior disorder” (or disobedience?), that is, their decision and will to unite themselves with Christ’s body in their mystical experiences.

It would have been interesting to go deeper into masculine mystical experiences and into three topics whose absence draws the careful reader’s attention. What was the meaning of mystical visions experienced by cloistered nuns, who had seen Jesus as a child and some of whom experienced painful headaches, as if Jesus had wanted to punish them for revealing feelings of maternity (see chapter on Paula Almeida Mendes)? Are these experiences to be understood as a way of sublimating interior feelings or maternity wishes? Or did these women (cloistered, but not in their spouse’s house) consider themselves to transcend the gender roles assigned to them, since they were mystic

women connected with Jesus, whom some of them considered their Spouse? Or would they really have wanted to have children, since some of them tell that Jesus came to them as a child and played with them in their arms? What would psychoanalysis have to say about experiences of punishment inflicted on these women's bodies that could well be considered masochistic experiences (see the already mentioned chapter by Mendes)? Finally, would it be possible to bring together eroticism with some of the experiences recounted by these women? For instance, how would the following excerpt be read outside of religious context: "I have accepted your offer of giving yourself to me [...] It comforts me, the simplicity in the way you offered yourself to me. I have chosen you [...] to be able to call you my wife" (p. 196)? Or, again, when Alexandrina reproduces the words of Jesus who allegedly told her: "You are beautiful, more and more beautiful, pure, more and more pure" (idem; my translations)?

The book is very relevant to the Portuguese context, even more so to women within it, both for the plurality of approaches it presents and for opening the door to studies concerning women in a country where feminist theology is almost non-existent.

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