Gender and the Vatican

JOAN W. SCOTT*

These thoughtful essays on what Eric Fassin calls 'sexual democracy' and its religious critics – mainly the Vatican – point to a number of important issues in the ongoing conflicts about the meanings of gender and the social and political implications of its use.

The first is the ongoing tension, as Fassin describes it, between nominalism and realism, or – to put it in other terms – constructivism and essentialism. In the one case, concepts are understood to be the product of human invention; their definition is historical and political and so open to revision and change. In the second case, concepts are immutable qualities referring to the essential properties of persons and things. But, as these essays demonstrate, this distinction is hard to maintain. They show that even as the Vatican wages its war on 'gender', it adjusts its own language to meet the challenge of feminists and queer theorists. So Mary Anne Case tracks the recent emergence in Catholic doctrine of the notion of the complementarity of women and men and the strategic insertion of 'equality' between the sexes in the period since WWII. Sara Garbagnoli shows that the Vatican insists it is defending the god-given natures of women and men, but it now (in order to repudiate feminism) talks in terms of equality in difference instead of women's submission to male rule. And Mario Pecheny and his colleagues link Argentina's transition to democracy (after 1983) with the possibility of articulating and winning claims for sexual rights of women and LGBT individuals. In Argentina, progressive religious figures ally with feminists and gay rights campaigners on grounds of humanitarian pluralism in the process implicitly endorsing the constructivist view even if they hold to transcendent beliefs.

A second insight offered by these papers is that secularism and religion are not opposites in the conservative Catholic discourses, but have been merged to create 'cathol-laïcité', as the French refer to it. I don't think the stark opposition between the secular and the religious was ever actually the case, except perhaps in the rhetoric of anti-clerical campaigns. But the Vatican has seized on the frenzy created by the 'Muslim question' in the countries of Western Europe to insist on the complementarity (!) of the secular and the religious. There was the grand meeting of Jürgen Habermas and Pope Benedict XVI at which the pope talked of the inherent rationality of Christianity (as compared to the irrationality of followers of Islam) and there was Benedict's endorsement of Nicolas

*Correspondence: Professor Emerita, School of Social Science, Institute for Advanced Study, 1 Einstein Drive, Princeton, New Jersey 08540, USA. E-mail: jws@ias.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License (3.0)

Religion and Gender | ISSN: 1878-5417 | www.religionandgender.org | Uopen Journals

Sarkozy's claim that French national identity was the product of two streams: Enlightenment and Christianity. As Garbagnoli cites it, Benedict said that Catholic countries did not have to 'cut their Christian roots' because it 'would...lose meaning and...weaken the cement of national identity'. Those Christian roots, of course, meant the recognition of the importance of heterosexual marriage to social and political stability. Nonetheless, the acceptance of Enlightenment opens the door to constructivist notions of gender.

A host of other contradictions emerge in these pages – between, for example, the progressive nature of Argentine legislation on sexual rights except for the question of abortion. Even as there is increased toleration of all manner of sexual practices, the importance of procreation as the primary goal of sex remains firmly in place.

And there is the odd way in which scholarly attempts to theorize gender – to study how and in what ways attributions of social roles are referred to presumed natural laws of sexual difference – have become reduced to 'gender theory' – a pernicious political doctrine aimed at the overthrow of social order as legislated by Nature and God. As Fassin points out, it is at once horrifying to see one's ideas so profoundly distorted and, yet, it is also satisfying to realize that an academic pursuit can have strong repercussions in the public sphere. As they seek to exorcise the demon of 'gender theory', the Vatican's representatives inevitably open a discussion that speaks the language of its designated enemies, even as it tries to silence them.

And then there is the carnivalesque aspect to all of this, so nicely evoked in Fassin's descriptions of boys in low-cut dresses protesting the 'papesse' of gender theory, Judith Butler, when she received an honorary degree at the University of Bordeaux. He recounts, too, the antics of Frigide Barjot and the naked chests and obscene references displayed by the opponents of gay marriage. In their fervent refusal of the widening of the acceptable boundaries of gender, these protestors seized the chance to indulge their deepest and most secret fantasies. The other side of the 'hidden homophobia' that Fassin attributes to this behavior is closeted homosexuality. These performances realize, after all, exactly the kind of joyous relief (a certain *jouissance*) promised by advocates of sexual democracy. And they remind us that religious prohibitions have always produced as many transgressions as they have repressions.

The Vatican's determination to eradicate 'gender theory' is a losing cause however concerted and vicious it is, however strategically it is now being managed by Pope Francis. These essays document its influence and its power, but they also expose its many contradictions. Those seem not only undeniable, but proof of the inevitable mutability of gender and of the impossibility of fixing the meanings of the differences of sex once and for all.