1. Towards Gender Equality

Given that religion is a fundamental socio-cultural factor, it is necessary to clarify how religious gender models shape socio-political gender roles. This interaction is a global phenomenon, but I will focus on the European situation. In fact, women’s legal and political equality with men was first realised in the 20th-century in Protestant countries in Northern Europe, although initially it was opposed by all Christian denominations. The recent accommodation to women’s socio-cultural advancement first occurred in Protestant churches, so that the traditional separation of male and female functions is stronger in the Catholic and Orthodox countries of the Mediterranean and Central and Eastern Europe. Here, women’s position in society is influenced by traditional anthropology and related to the private sphere of the family, whereas hierarchical functions of priests and bishops are reserved for men. In Northern Europe, women have increasingly achieved an autonomous position in the public sphere, owing to the welfare system of social-democratic state feminism.1

The European Commission’s document Towards a Community Framework Strategy on Gender Equality (2001–2005) contained a section (3,5) on promoting change of gender roles and gender stereotypes, but without any reference to the religious foundation of socio-cultural androcentrism. Nevertheless, Annex I and II demonstrate that the lower participation of women in the workforce and in political decision-making corresponds to the division between countries with Catholic or Protestant culture. This imbalance is aggravated by the recent accession of Catholic (Malta, Poland, Slovakia) and Orthodox (Rumania, Bulgaria) member states, despite their failure to comply with the Union’s legal norms of gender equality.

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In fact, the Commission’s ideal of gender equality is inspired by the Northern partnership model of collaboration by women and men in all fields of society, including religion. It is essential to observe that this modern paradigm, where sexual difference does not impose separate and non-interchangeable male and female roles, is contrary to the asymmetrical gender polarity of traditional Jewish, Christian and Islamic anthropology, euphemistically termed ‘complementarity’ of the sexes by recent Vatican documents.²

2. Feminist Epistemology

In a historical perspective, it is necessary to observe that women’s achievement of bio-socio-political and religious autonomy results from the recent epistemological revolution of feminism, where both sexes are defined as human beings of equal status. In fact, the ensuing collapse of androcentrism in Western civilization is a radically new phenomenon in human history, since gender equality never existed in any known society before the 20th-century European welfare states.

This entirely secular principle derives from the 18th-century European Enlightenment, claiming civil rights for men, droits de l’homme. Since the 20th century, these have been transformed to human rights for both sexes, droits humains, in international law: Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) 1948; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) 1966; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) 1966.³ Of special importance is the United Nations’ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of