Recognising Religious Women as Feminist Subjects: The Case of Catholic Feminists in Brazil

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The position of white Western feminists regarding religious women, and more specifically Muslim women, is increasingly contested. In Western discourses, religious women are considered either too oppressed to speak for themselves or too dominated to express a real "free choice" (Delphy 2008; Scott 2007). By locking them in this subjugated position, feminist theory denies religious women agency and capacity to be part of the feminist movement. Though not religious myself, the exclusion of religious women – or of any woman – from feminist theory and practice seems very problematic to me. I find it crucial to rethink common assumptions about religion, secularity and feminism, and to question how part of the feminist movement has become so intolerant of the religious "other".

Challenging the definition of "modernisation" as "Westernization"

The Brazilian NGO Católicas para o Direito de Decidir (Catholics for the Right to Choose – CDD) are not the "victims" depicted in mainstream discourses on "Third World women" (Mohanty 1988), nor are they the unheard and marginalised "subaltern" theorised by Spivak (1988). The coordinators of the organisation are "white" in a country where "white" is the rich minority, they are part of an international network of pro-choice NGOs, and they are college educated. This group can be defined as feminist by "European" standards: they demand the legalisation of abortion, defend women's "autonomy", and use the discourse of human rights to justify their claims. The CDDs therefore seem to correspond to the idea of the "modern". Yet they also are religious, and promote the construction of a 'theological feminist discourse'.

This imbrication of modern and traditional could be described as 'hybrid'. García Canclini's (1995: 54) contends that Latin America is trying to modernise while accommodating its persistent traditional structures. Modernisation is not a linear process that eliminates and replaces the traditional; it is imbricated with and simultaneous to the traditional. However, this definition of hybridity problematically reasserts the link modern/Western. If "hybrid" is neither completely modern nor completely traditional, there still exists an absolute and "pure" modernity (Stockhammer 2012). Williams (2002: 14) argues that García Canclini's conception of modernity continues to link modernisation to the Western mode of development as it situates the hybrid in the encounter between progress and (local) traditionalism. Catholic feminists' "modern" demands could then only be the result of a certain degree of "Westernization", their more traditional/religious characteristics being by contrast Latin American.

Uma Narayan (1997) challenges this idea that "Westernization" means positive change in Third World countries. She argues that change often comes from within a specific culture, and that feminist demands are rooted in the local experience of women. Seen in this light, CDDs contestation of mainstream religious discourses is more a product of the Brazilian context than a sign of "Westernization". They do not contest religion itself, as most feminist movements do in Europe, but its institutions. Their conception of religion is deeply influenced by the Theology of Liberation that has structured Brazilian Catholic and social movements for decades (Lehmann

1996). According to this religious theory, class struggle and the fight for equality are the real meaning of Christian brotherhood (Gutierrez 1973). Their feminist demands and particular religious ethos therefore come from their experience as Brazilian women rather than from an attempt to "Westernize".

Redefining the boundaries of the "religious" and the "secular"

The CDDs bring together religion and feminist politics, and defend the 'democratic principle of a secular state, in particular its autonomy from religious groups'. They ask for protection from religion in the public sphere while promoting Catholic values in their actions. In her analysis of Muslim's use of the discourse of rights after the ban of the veil in France, Barras (2009) argues that they use the discourse of rights – a secular discourse – to defend their rights as a minority group. Similarly, the CDDs use the discourse of rights to make both feminist and religious claims legitimate. They present their faith as compatible with the norm of secularity.

Following Spivak's (1993: 46) discussion on liberal individualism, we could qualify secularity as a form of modernity that 'one cannot not want'. Brazil is a very religious country, with only 8% of the population who declares not having any religion, yet secularity seems to be one of the dominant languages to be represented and heard in the public sphere. I simultaneously argue that religion, and more precisely Catholic religion, is also a language that one cannot escape in the Brazilian context. The CDDs themselves argue that given the prevalence of religion, a redefinition of Catholic values will be more efficient in bringing women to feminism than a frontal opposition to religion. Religion thus provides the grounds for legitimacy in the public sphere, but it has to be combined with the defence of a certain (modern) idea of secularity.

CDDs' position represents an 'in-between' or an 'interstitial' space (Bhabha 1994: 4), a possibility of being neither religious nor secular, or maybe both at the same time. Bhabha (1994: 256) further defines hybridity as a form of subjectivity empowered 'in the act of erasing the politics of binary opposition'. The contingent and the ambivalent become the spaces for representation. By making secularity and religion work together, CDDs' discourse enables women to self-define as both religious and feminist without asking them to choose between different "sections" of their identity.

Henold (2008: 11) talks of 'sustained ambivalence' to describe the attitude of Catholic feminist towards the Church in the USA. The 'sustained ambivalence' characterises a loyalty to the religion combined to an increasing distance with its formal institutions. This concept captures quite well the position of the Brazilian NGO: the members are in opposition to religious prescriptions that directly contradict feminist demands, but they still define themselves as Catholic and act according to their faith. These women provide a "counter-hegemonic" discourse to both mainstream Catholicism and secular feminism, creating a space of self-definition "in-between" contradictory forces. Their very existence shows the limits of the binary opposition secular/religious.

Are religious subjects "political enough" to be feminist?

Secularism assumes that 'the secular and the sacred can be divided in the lives of individuals' (Scott 2007: 98). Citizens can be religious as long as they keep their faith for the private sphere. They are asked to be "rational" enough to separate their beliefs from their understanding of public matters (Mahmood 2011). But can we ever make such a clear distinction between our "intimate" and our "public" life? Can we forget that we are "woman", "black" or "Muslim" once we enter the "public space" so as to guarantee the neutrality of this space? As demonstrated by black feminist scholars, individuals are different things at the same time and cannot be forced to choose between their sex, colour, class or religion (Hill Collins 2007).

In the case of the CDDs, religion has to be understood as something eminently political. They use religion as a political element and as a justification for their action. It is because they are Catholic that they are feminist, and it is in the name of a "feminist theology" that they defend the right to abortion and autonomy. For the CDDs, Catholic ethos is the basis for a feminist practice. Despite being a religious group, they also use the secular language of rights and human rights to defend

abortion and women's autonomy. In 2006, the NGO published a book entitled 'In defence of life – abortion and human rights' (my translation), where they emphasise the international legal framework on reproductive rights to exercise pressure on the Brazilian state regarding the legalisation of abortion. The language of rights provides an internationally backed discourse that reinforces the demands of local movements (Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi 2004; Molyneux 2006).

While dominant feminist discourse insists on breaking the division public/private to demand reproductive and sexual rights, they reinstate this division when it comes to religion. Unlike sexuality or pregnancy, religious beliefs should stay in the private sphere. I am not arguing against a separation between the state and religious institutions, I am suggesting that it is really difficult to separate religious beliefs and political views at the individual level. Religion is indeed 'embodied' and 'performed' (Mahmood 2005) by the subjects and therefore not easily detachable from their everyday actions. In the case of the CDDs, religion, politics and feminism cannot be distinguished. They form a whole that allows Catholic feminists' *subjectivation* (Foucault 1984) and self-definition.

Mack (2003) and Mahmood (2005) have argued that religion enables us to rethink agency as bound-up with coercion. It shows the limits of the liberal conception of agency as the expression of a non-coerced "free will". By recognising an external authority, religious subjects situate the legitimate source of their action outside the individual (Mack 2003). No choice is ever totally "free" from social and political constraints (Madhok, Phillips and Wilson 2013). Besides, agency is not a quality or a characteristic possessed by individuals; it is better defined as embedded in – and produced by – social relationships (Lépinard 2011; Madhok, Phillips and Wilson 2013). The way the CDDs use and redefine religious norms for the purpose of feminist politics shows not only that they resist and contest, but also that they 'inhabit' (Mahmood 2005: 15) these norms. Their construction as subjects is the product of their specific location within Brazilian cultural, social and political structures. Collective action is by definition constraining. But the definition of a collective identity, such as "feminist", can be in itself an empowering experience to which no one should be denied access.

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The case of the CDD raises the question of who is available for representation as feminist subjects and how to create this availability. These religious women certainly do not fit in the Western model of reasonable/secular individual, detached from religion and faith. Yet they mobilise the discourses of rights, modernity and secularity to articulate religious beliefs with feminist demands. This case study is only one specific case, but I hope it can enable us to reconsider our own practices and theories. I believe we have to engage with contradiction at all times and create the conditions for a 'transnational feminist solidarity' (Mohanty 2003: 3). Religion is of course a constraining structure, just as is capitalism or patriarchy, but we do not refuse a woman the status of feminist subject just because she lives in a capitalist state (Moghadam 2002). We all have to negotiate within our own context and cultural rules. The experience of the CDDs illustrates how one can engage with constraining structures and internal contradictions to defend a feminist agenda.

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