

Editorial

In June 2016 the South African Commission on Gender Equality declared that a local KwaZulu-Natal municipality's scheme of "bursaries for virgins" was unlawful, unconstitutional, and discriminatory. The findings and recommendations of the report were celebrated by gender activists who welcomed the recognition of the CGE that this scheme was marked by culturally patriarchal ideals of women's bodies. Significant within the celebrations of the ruling, was little evidence of deep and thoughtful engagement with the tensions between provisions by the constitution of South Africa for cultural and religious freedom and women's bodily autonomy. Moreover, the ruling brought up for introspection an interrogation of the ways in which femininity and masculinity are conceptualized within religious and cultural domains. This and other contemporary case studies within South Africa and beyond, highlight the need for continuous and sustained theoretical and philosophical engagement on the intersections of gender, religion and culture that is firmly rooted within an advocacy paradigm.

We are pleased that the contributions in this issue of the journal provide critical reflections and analysis within this broad focus. The articles by John Klaasen and Jennifer Slater concentrate on the constructions of sex difference within the disciplines of ecclesiology (focusing on ministry) and systematic theology (focusing on anthropology) respectively. Klaasen draws on the dialectic approach of Rosemary Ruether to provide "some markers for a model of ministry that is mutually enriching, reciprocal and socially relevant." The article is a welcome contribution to the discussions around the role of women in Christian ministry within post-Apartheid South Africa.

While Klassen suggests how contrasts can be used in productive ways, Slater, drawing on feminist philosopher Grace Jantzen's work, shows the ways in which the conceptual foundations of sex difference and contrasts within traditional Christian thought "generate a construction of gender, both masculine and feminine, that in turn makes gender violence almost inevitable." Slater traces a history of "image of God theology" which contends that women are not fully created in the image of God, but in the image of man. She ends by arguing that a more responsible theology must hold that "women subsist in the patronage of the Divine and not by proxy", so that violence against women can indeed be seen as violence against the divine.

Keeping with the theme of violence, Sinenhlanhla Chisale uses an auto-ethnographic method to trace the ways in which pre-marital counselling within Christianity and African traditional religion, “introduce the newly married couple to androcentric and binary views of marriage.” A detailed and in-depth examination of various teachings from religious and cultural pre-marital counselling sessions demonstrate the links between the teachings and gender-based violence.

The contributions by Fatima Seedat and Leila Hassim both take a methodological and theoretical turn, showing up the possibilities that emerge for engaging religious texts and systems when feminist reading strategies or feminist strategies for protest are applied as heuristic devices. In Seedat’s piece she offers an analysis of a sufi narrative on sex difference, and convincingly “illustrate[s] the complex and contested representation of female spirituality in Islamic thought.” In doing so, she locates “contemporary negotiations of female spiritual agency along an historical trajectory of negotiation,” thus countering much of the binaries which persist in discussions on sex difference, including those which maintain that gender equality work originates outside of Islam.

Continuing in a philosophical and literary paradigm, Leila Hassim offers a medieval manuscript (*The Mirror*) by Marguerite Porete as an example of the power of counter-religious movements, as well as a filter through which to view the contemporary charismatic movements in South Africa. The parallels between the manuscript and the movements, are drawn by reading Marguerite’s text and that of the contemporary charismatic movement as “mirror movements” of each other, each devoted to responding to “repressive legislation from an ecclesiastical source.” She concludes with a plea to consider “Marguerite’s recognition of variation and how all differences are actually a sameness” so that we may “adjust our perspectives of charismatic churches and instead of viewing them suspiciously like Marguerite was viewed in her day, we might have to view them as part of a functioning macrocosm exercising their variation towards a universal wholeness.”

From an analysis of the ways in which the construction of sex difference within patriarchal religious systems leads to inequity (Klassen) and violence (Slater and Chisale); to the importance of the consideration of feminist reading strategies and strategies of feminist protest, as a means with which to make sense of the gendered world we live in, the issue concludes with an article by Herbert Moyo which points to the importance of the recovery of women’s often un-noticed agency within patriarchal religious systems. Moyo uses the church-women’s leagues in Southern Africa as an important case study of “ecumenical

movements from below,” and suggests that scholars of ecumenism ignore the agency of these women who work within a feminist ecclesiological paradigm at their peril.

Sarojini Nadar and Fatima Seedat