

Interreligious dialogue as an answer to gender violence

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This article has two parts. The first is an analysis of the growing phenomenon and the dramatic reality of violence against women. The second tries to bring an answer to this situation from interreligious dialogue and feminist interpretation of the founding texts of religions.

Gender violence and patriarchy

“Every three minutes a woman is beaten, every ten minutes a young girl is accosted, every day bodies of women appear in narrow streets, in their beds, on the landing of the stairs”. This was written five decades ago by the Afroamerican poet Ntozake Shange.

Today the situation has worsened and gender martyrology is growing very rapidly. Femicide is not an individual phenomenon but a collective one. It is the way patriarchy reacts to the advances of feminism in the recognition of the rights of women and their conquests on the plane of equality. Femicide, feminicides in plural, are the extreme type of gender violence, but there are many other ways in which women suffer: sexual abuses in schools, in parishes, in seminaries, in their own families and workplaces, sexual tourism in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the mutilation of genital organs, lapidation under the accusation of infidelity or adultery, the majority of these cases are unsubstantiated, sexual mutilations, systematic violations of human rights, especially of women’s sexual and reproductive rights, aggressions and death sentences, forced prostitution and the prostitution of boys and girls, collective rapes in wartime...

The bodies of women have become an occupied territory in wars and they are permanently violated in our daily lives in multiple ways: rape within marriage and during premarital relations, exhausting domestic work, the exploitation of domestic workers, the inhuman conditions of migrant women, sadomasochist practices, physical and psychical aggressions, the contagion of AIDS by their own husbands and companions, serial murders, sexual abuses of mentally sick persons, rape in refugee camps, kidnapping of girls in places of patriarchal discrimination like the case of the two hundred and fifty schoolgirls in Nigeria by Boko Haram, and so on.

In Latin America, one woman in every three has been a victim of violence, or lives with the physical, psychological or sexual violence of their own partner or former partner. Violence also takes place in workplaces, in leisure areas, in the streets, in the media, in the schoolrooms.

I want to make a special mention of the gender violence that takes place in religious areas, faith

communities, religious congregations. How? By means of the diffusion of doctrines or machist religious interpretations that give rise to harassment, pressure, illtreatment, discrimination and even sexual aggressions. In many of these areas, there is a rule of sacred masculinity that establishes men as the only representatives of God with the right to impose their authority over women, on whom they impose a morality of slaves.

In all these situations of violence, we must add other forms of economic and cultural violence, by the communications media and publicity.

Gender violence does not respond to an isolated or perverse individual behaviour belonging to violent men who are dominated by evil or who in a moment of anger strike women brutally and end up by killing them. That is the image of a supposedly benevolent patriarchy, but can benevolence exist in patriarchy? I think it is an oxymoron to speak of a benevolent patriarchy, as though one wanted to transmit to society a social image that provides a psychological explanation.

But reality is completely different. Violence against women is a collective phenomenon, it is the way in which patriarchy reacts to the advances achieved in the recognition of women's rights. It is structurally normative and must be understood and analysed in a systemic format.

It is the instrument, or to be more exact, it is the normalised weapon patriarchy uses to maintain its power and exercise it despotically on persons it considers to be inferior: women, girls, children. Violence against women – according to the theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza – constitutes the essential nucleus of kiriarchical oppression. Instead of using the word patriarchy she used kiriarchy, a new word Elisabeth has created that explains the idea of the despotical government of the lord, owner, father and husband over his male and female subordinates.

This violence is not only physical, it also includes the cultural and religious construction of docile feminine bodies and obedient feminine personalities. The idea of violence against women constitutes the essential nucleus of patriarchy or kiriarchy, in the words of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, is shared by Joan Carlson Brown, a female minister of the United Methodist Church and editor of the work "Christianity, Patriarchy and abuse: A Feminist criticism", for whom violence and sexual abuses are the principal instruments of patriarchy that support the dominance of men over women.

The most serious and worrying fact is that in this patriarchal or kiriararchical power play, christianity or at least not a few of its theologians – I mean male theologians because I think the female theologians have a totally anti-patriarchal mentality – support one of the sides and not precisely the most vulnerable one.

Patriarchy does not act alone without complicity with other powers and oppressive models of organization such as, colonialism, racism, neoliberalism, the destruction of nature, and especially, aporophobia, which is the hatred of poor people and in this subject, the hatred of impoverished women, of their lives and the negation of their dignity.

Patriarchy has a defined or tacit agreement with these systems of domination, that affect the whole social structure, education, the labour sector, religion, the armed forces, etc. Its combined activity results in the submission of women to the logic of men, their social, political and religious invisibilization, their negation as subjects of human rights and in some cases, sadly in many cases, their physical disappearance.

Here I would like to underline a key factor that inspires decolonial feminism, in a majority way in Latin America and in countries of the global South. It is the idea of the intersectionality of gender, ethnia, culture, social class, sexual identity and it coincides there, for gender violence, the fact that generalises in a special way in empoverished women, immigrants, belonging to discriminated cultures or marginalised and with sexual identities that to not correspond to the hetero normativity and sexual binarity.

Feminism, one of the few bloodless revolutions of history, provokes in patriarchy a violent, unsuspected and unexpected, reaction by the church hierarchy, which considers “gender ideology” as an “insidious revolution”, the most perverse of ideologies (according to Cardinal Antonio Canizares) and the “sexual revolution as one of the most responsible causes for the alarming increase of domestic violence, of the destruction of the family, of the sexual abuses and acts of violence of all kinds, including even of minors in the same family” (Directory of Family Pastoral of the Church in Spain, approved in the 81st Plenary Assembly of the Spanish Bishops Conference on November 21 2003).

More serious still, Cardinal Canizares after calling for pardon for the sexual violence against minors in Irish schools over several decades, *relativised* the gravity of those abuses in comparison with abortion. How irrational! But Spanish episcopal irrationality reaches extremes which it would be difficult to overreach in the case of *Alfa y Omega*, a weekly of the Archdioceses of Madrid which reached the level of stating: “when sex is trivialised, it becomes disassociated with

matrimony and rape loses its consideration as a penal crime” (sic). This “religious” legitimisation of rape is a violent aggression against those women raped, a real crime! Do all the bishops share these unmerciful declarations signed by Ricardo Benjumea, chief editor of the above mentioned “catholic information weekly”.

In religions there are models of patriarchal domination that invite acceptance in legitimising an unjust authority and influencing negatively in life-giving experiences such as love, the body, pleasure, spirituality and the sacred, and justify the suffering of women by appealing to their sense of redemption. These models of domination do not promote pleasure for women, whilst the enjoyment of pleasure by men is considered a right.

Still worse, they inflict in women pain in recognising the sense of redemption, and, in the case of christianity, give as an example the imitation of the sufferings of Christ and the martyrs. This is one of the greatest perversions of the christianity which originated in Jesus of Nazareth who stated: “I want compassion, not sacrifices”.

The liberating Christ fights precisely against the causes and reasons that lead to violence against women, because if there is one thing that theologians of the origins of Christianity must remember, it is that Jesus of Nazareth did not found a church, at least not the church as it is currently organised in a hierarchical, pyramidal and patriarchal manner. And I do not believe that any of the founders of religions created institutions that discriminated on the basis of gender at the time of their founding. As far as Christianity is concerned, it was an egalitarian movement of men and women who accompany and follow Jesus of Nazareth in proclaiming the kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice, liberation and solidarity.

Religions, sad to say, are one of the last bastions that legitimise patriarchy and indirectly gender-based violence, violence of all kinds: physical, symbolic, sexual, and we find this in the founding texts of religions, especially in the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible and the Koran, the three monotheistic religions.

Gender violence, discrimination against women and their inferiorisation are legitimised through certain sacred texts, for example, the “texts of terror” in the Hebrew Bible, which are critically analysed by feminist theologian Philis Trible. But we must also talk about the texts in the Christian Bible that impose on women submission to men, modesty, silence in public, and a prohibition of prophesying and teaching. How do these texts justify the submission of women? By appealing to the biblical mythology of one of the creation stories in Genesis: that of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib. Woman was created from man, is inferior to him, and must be at his service.

Here I would like to make a digression. Feminism often accuses Paul of Tarsus of being patriarchal.

This is not true, because the texts that defend this discrimination and impose silence, modesty and the refusal to allow women to teach are texts from the so-called 'Pastoral Letters', which were not written by Paul, but interpolated into Paul's authentic letters.

Recently, in a master's degree course at the Carlos III University of Madrid, at the end of the class a student asked me, 'Can you tell us about Lilith?' and the students were very surprised because I think that, except for the person who asked the question, no one knew who Lilith was. Lilith, I told them, was Adam's first wife, who refused to obey Adam's orders and left him. When Adam realised that Lilith had abandoned him, he turned to God, who told him that he had reason to be indignant and ordered a group of angels to search for Lilith.

The different forms of violence against women are the result of the alliance between male gods and sacred masculinities. Men consider themselves the sole representatives of the male God. One student said to me, 'Professor, but Lilith is a myth,' and I replied, "But... what do you think, that Eve is not a myth? But there is a difference between the two myths: Lilith is the expression and image of the emancipation of women who resist complying with the patriarchal mandates of God and men, while Eve is the myth of the woman who submits and obeys men. You choose which of the myths you want to be your reference point in the relationship between men and women.

The Qur'an, considered by many Muslim feminists to be a book in defence of women's emancipation, has some texts that seem to legitimise violence, such as the following: "Men have authority over women by virtue of the preference God has given to some over others and the wealth they spend. Admonish those of whom you fear rebellion, leave them alone in bed, beat them! If they obey you, do not remonstrate them any more" (Quran 4:34).

The different Islamic legal schools show significant differences when it comes to identifying what is meant by the potential rebellion referred to in the Quranic text. There are also differences in the translation of the verb *dáraba*, which in most Spanish versions is translated as 'beat them'.

But for me, the most serious concern is not only that gender-based violence is found in sacred texts, which must be read in their context, but that gender-based violence is considered legitimate and normative at all times, in all places and in all circumstances. Worse still, these texts continue to be read in religious celebrations and preached in some way and, what is even sadder for me, they continue to be taught in catechesis.

Interreligious dialogue and feminist interpretation, a response to gender-based violence

In this second part, we discuss interreligious dialogue as a response to violence against women in different belief systems. One of the characteristics of interreligious dialogue must be the feminist

interpretation of different sacred texts. This is one of the ways to defuse violence and discrimination against women, deconstruct religious practices that may legitimise such violence, and create an egalitarian, fraternal-sororal society.

In my view, there are two ways or tasks to defuse violence against women in interfaith dialogue. The first is to recover the female figures in religions who played a leading role in the liberation of the people and women subjected to patriarchal oppression. We must recover the voice of women in sacred texts because the only voice that generally appears is the voice of men, considered to be the voice of God. I believe that the voice of women present in sacred texts is the voice of God, contrary to patriarchal interpretation, which considers that the word of God is the word of the male God and is interpreted legitimately and authoritatively by sacred masculinities.

In turn, women must be considered legitimate interpreters of sacred texts on an equal footing with men. In interfaith encounters, we should bring to the table those women from different religions who worked for justice, equality, and fraternity-sorority, until egalitarian communities were formed.

The second path is the recovery of texts that defend equality between men and women.

-In the Hebrew Bible, Genesis 1:26-27: 'And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.'

- In the Christian Bible, Paul of Tarsus' Letter to the Galatians 3:28: 'There is no longer slave or freeman, Jew or Gentile, male or female, for you are all one through Jesus Christ the Messiah.'

In the Qur'an 9:71-72: "But the believers, men and women, are friends of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. They perform prayer, give alms, and obey God and His Messenger. God will have mercy on them. God is powerful and wise. He has promised the believers, male and female, gardens beneath which rivers flow, where they will abide forever, and pleasant dwellings in the gardens of Eden. But God's satisfaction will be even better. That is the great success!

In the Qur'an, 16:97: 'To the believer, male or female, who does good, We will surely give a good life, and We will reward them according to their best deeds.'

In the Qur'an 33:35: "God has prepared forgiveness and a magnificent reward for Muslim men and women, believers, devout men and women, sincere men and women, the patient, the humble, those who give alms, those who fast, the chaste, and those who remember God often."

It is also important, for example, in the case of the Hebrew Bible, instead of focusing on the

creation of Eve from Adam's rib, to focus on the first account of creation in Genesis, which I have just quoted: 'And God created human beings as male and female, male and female he created them in his own image and likeness.' This text is powerful and illuminating enough to make it clear that women are images of God, and not simply subordinates to men.

In the Christian Bible, there is a very illuminating text that makes clear the equality between men and women: the text from Paul's letter to the Galatians, also quoted above, when he says: 'You are all one in Christ, there is no longer male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile' (Galatians 3:28). It is, as Ernst Bloch affirms, the first International of Equality, which is not limited to the religious sphere, but also implies a change in the social sphere. Therefore, according to this text, discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion or gender is not justified in Christ. The same can be said of the Qur'an, which has many texts that support and defend equality between men and women.

The third task in interfaith dialogue to defuse violence against women is to depatriarchalise and demasculinise images of God in religious, social and cultural imaginaries, where the masculine image of God is so deeply rooted because, as American feminist thinker Mary Daly asserts, "if God is male, then man is God". The masculinisation of God leads to the deification of man. Indeed, the masculinity of God turns men into gods with the same powers as the divine. The demasculinisation of God is the best way to delegitimise patriarchy and its violent and discriminatory nature towards women.

Likewise, we must question the attributes that the old theodicy applies to God: omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, providence and sometimes violence. All five end (in Spanish) in CIA. That God can only make pacts with the great international organisation that controls the lives of all human beings, the CIA.

These attributes must be removed from the divinity because what they do is further legitimise violence against women. We should activate other images that also appear in the sacred texts: God as friend, lover, identified with victims, and other attributes: giver of life, source of life, and attributes such as tenderness, mercy, compassion, solidarity with those who suffer, the option for impoverished and abused women, etc. Such a change in divine images and attributes is, for me, a fundamental and an unavoidable task, and it must be put on the table for dialogue, which you are conducting in such an exemplary and admirable manner. Because, as the writer Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio states, 'as long as the gods do not change, nothing will change'.

I will conclude by quoting the sadly true statement by the American philosopher Kate Millet, one of the leading figures of third-wave feminism, in her book *Sexual Politics*: 'Patriarchy always has

God on its side.’

We need to turn this statement on its head and say that it is egalitarian feminism, feminism that recognises women's rights, that has God on its side. This must be one of the premises of interfaith dialogue in order to deactivate the sacred texts that in one way or another justify the oppression of women.

Gender violence? Never in the name of God.

In her work *Sacred Pleasure* (Cuatro Vientos, Santiago de Chile, 1998), Riane Eisler distinguishes two ways of structuring human relationships: one is solidarity-based or gilamic, and the other is androcentric or domineering. In each model, relationships are established between sex, power and love, as well as between pain, pleasure and the sacred. The first model places men alongside women, rulers at the service of their subjects, and human beings in symmetrical communication with nature.

Eisler demonstrates through archaeology, art, folklore, and mythology that the original direction in the structuring of human relationships was the solidarity model and that a cultural shift subsequently took place in favour of the androcentric model. To combat gender violence, it is necessary to return to the gilamic model of human relations, which must be structured around fraternal-sororal solidarity.

The dialogical encounter between religions must move in this direction and thus contribute to the elimination of all discrimination and violence against women and to the construction of ‘Another Possible World’ under the ethical principle of gender equality and justice.

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