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GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Gender and sexuality have become key concepts in the study of Christianity in the global South, and are indeed vital to understanding the cultural and social dynamics in which Christianity is embedded in various local contexts. For the purpose of this essay, I take gender to broadly refer to the context-specific meanings, values and roles associated with the different sexes, that is, with being male or female. Sexuality refers to people's expression and orientation of sexual desire, and the identities based on these. In contemporary scholarship, both categories of gender and of sexuality are generally perceived as being socially constructed, and as embedded in structures of power.

It were feminist scholars who introduced and applied gender as a critical concept in relation to global Christianities, while denouncing the patriarchal (male-dominated and male-privileging) nature of Christian traditions and institutions. Building on, but at the same time challenging the work of feminist theologians in North America and Europe, women theologians in the global South in the last quarter of the 20th century have drawn attention to the particular experiences of women in their parts of the world. Highlighting the intersection of gender, race/ethnicity, and class (or in India: caste), they have made women's experiences of struggle, resistance, and survival the starting point for the development of what is referred to as 'third world women's (or feminist) theologies' (King, 1994). The work of Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Isabel Phiri in Africa, Marianne Katoppo and Chung Hyun Kyung in Asia, and Ivone Gebara and Elsa Támez in Latin America is exemplary here. Following the postcolonial critique of Western monolithic

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representations of 'the third world woman' as being oppressed and powerless, feminist

theologians from the global South have foregrounded women's practices of hope and liberation.

In the social-scientific study of Christianity in the global South, gender has been employed to examine and foreground the ways in which women navigate and negotiate patriarchal traditions and institutions, and demonstrate agency for example in initiating religious renewal and innovation. In Africa, for instance, both the African initiated (or indigenous) churches (AICs) in the first half of the 20th century, and the (neo-)Pentecostal or Charismatic churches in the late 20th and early 21st century, have demonstrated significant levels of women's involvement not just in evangelism and leadership, but also in charismatic ministries such as prophecy and healing (Soothill, 2007). Pentecostalism in various parts of the global South has largely been a women's movement. Recent studies have explored the paradox of Pentecostalism on the one hand perpetuating traditional patriarchal notions of male headship and female submission while on the other hand empowering women spiritually and socially, both in the church, at home and in society at large and thus having an egalitarian impulse (Brusco, 2010). Like many Pentecostal churches, also other denominations such as the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church usually have large women's groups where particular gendered norms and styles are being reproduced and cultivated.

From the initial focus on women, the study of gender and Christianity in the global South more recently has widened its scope to include an analysis of men and masculinities, that is, constructions of male gender (van Klinken, 2013). On the one hand, it is critically examined how mainstream Christian discourses reinforce patriarchal notions of masculinity in local cultures and societies, and thus may contribute to problems such as the oppression of women, gender-based violence, and the spread of HIV. On the other hand, it is investigated how Christianity can also

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bring about positive change in men and masculinities and may help to transform gender relations. Especially evangelical and Pentecostal forms of Christianity have been associated with bringing about a domestication of men and a redefinition of masculinity – or, to use a Latin American term, a 'reformation of machismo' (Brusco 2010) – as part of the process of born-again conversion. Catholic men's groups, such as the St Joachim Catholic Men's Organization in Zambia, sometimes have a patron saint which they present as a model of Catholic manhood to be imitated by their members. In Africa, Christian theologians and gender activists have recently engaged in a quest for transformative, redemptive or liberating masculinities in the face of social challenges such as HIV and AIDS, and gender-based violence (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012).

In the area of sexuality, crucial questions are concerned with the ways in which Christianity regulates and disciplines certain forms of sexuality, while politicizing and prohibiting other sexual practices and identities, in the context of broader socio-cultural dynamics and political economies of sexuality. In Africa and other parts of the global South, missionary Christianity typically came with a set of puritan values that often were alien to traditional sexual cultures, for example introducing strict norms of monogamy, sex within marriage, and exclusive heterosexuality. These values and norms are still upheld and in fact actively promoted in most Christian churches and organizations to date. Thus, in the face of the HIV pandemic many Christian leaders have struggled to include the use of condoms in their prevention messages as they felt this would be a way of allowing for 'promiscuity' – they rather emphasized sexual abstinence and marital fidelity. In particular evangelical and Pentecostal forms of Christianity tend to have a dominant notion of 'sexual purity', which they promote through youth groups, marriage courses, women's and men's fellowships, as well as through modern media.

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In much of the global South, and especially so in Africa, the past decade has witnessed an increased politicization of homosexuality (Chitando & van Klinken, 2016). This started in the late 1990s with the increasingly public controversy within the global Anglican Communion, where church leaders from the global South mobilized and voted overwhelmingly against provisions for the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy, and the blessing of same-sex relationships, in more liberal Anglican churches in the global North (especially the US). With the globalization of discourses of lesbian and gay identities and rights, and the subsequent increased visibility of lesbian and gay activists and communities in the global South over the past decade, many a Christian leader has invoked a strong religious rhetoric to oppose homosexuality – which, they believe, is a practice that is against the Bible and against their culture, and is imposed by the West if not by the Devil himself. In this context of an ever-expanding politicization of homosexuality and controversy over sexual rights, in various societies within the global South also an emerging counter-discourse can be observed: of lesbian and gay people who claim to be Christian and find ways to negotiate their sexuality and faith, and of lesbian and gay right advocates using Christian-inspired arguments to make their case. They critically denounce the hetero-normativity characterizing much of Christianity, and the subsequent exclusion of sexual minorities, and they contribute to the development of what are called 'queer' spaces and theologies within global Christianity.

Most recently, two new categories have begun to receive attention in societies in the global South: intersex – referring to people whose physical make up does not fit in the male-female binary – and transgender – referring to people whose gender identity is not congruent with their biological sex. It is yet to be examined what the relation between these gender and sexual minority groups, and Christian churches exactly is.

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To conclude, issues of gender and sexuality are at the heart of processes of cultural change and social transformation in the various contexts of Christianity in the global South. Given their deeply political nature, they will continue to give rise to controversy and debate. It is important to prevent generalizing accounts, and instead to take into account the rather wide-ranging attitudes towards, and opinion about, issues of gender and sexuality across various Christian denominations and movements as well as in different contexts. It is equally important to not only look at the formal discourses and politics, but also at what is actually happening at a grassroots level in local contexts.

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