

# **Women in Catholicism or the eternal absence**

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### **La mujer en el catolicismo o la eterna invisible**

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#### **Resumen**

A partir de un trabajo de campo antropológico en las provincias de Huelva y Sevilla (España), el artículo reflexiona sobre la situación, la participación y las aspiraciones de la mujer andaluza en la religión católica. Las actividades femeninas en lo religioso se manifiestan, a menudo, como una prolongación de las tareas domésticas y por tanto menos visibles y a veces menos valoradas, mientras que las actividades masculinas son más perceptibles, en cuanto se producen en lo público, un espacio reservado a la masculinidad. Por otra parte, el artículo se acerca a las asociaciones voluntarias más importantes de Andalucía -las hermandades- y a los rituales más relevantes que desde éstas se organizan. En este sentido, se analizan las procesiones, las romerías, las visitas a los santuarios o el sistema de promesas para poner de manifiesto como a pesar de que la presencia y participación femenina en los rituales religioso populares es muy importante, el papel predominante y protagonista es sin embargo masculino.

**Palabras clave:** Catolicismo; Género; Hermandades; Romerías; Andalucía

#### **Abstract**

Based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the provinces of Huelva and Seville (Spain), this article reflects on the current situation, participation and aspirations of Andalusian women in Catholicism. Female activity in the religious sphere is shown to often manifest as an extension of domestic tasks and, as such, is seen as less visible and often less valued. The activities carried out by men, however, are more perceptible in that they are enacted in public, a space traditionally reserved for men. The article also considers Andalusia's most important voluntary associations -the Brotherhoods- and the rituals most relevant to them. As such, the processions, religious pilgrimages, visits to sanctuaries as well as the system of asking for

religious favours are analysed. The outcome of such analysis is that, despite the importance of both the presence and participation of women in religious rites, the predominant role in such activities remains largely male.

**Keywords:** Catholicism; Gender; Brotherhoods; Religious Pilgrimages; Andalusia

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**SUMARIO:** 1. Introduction. 2. Christianity and gender relations. 3. Women and religion in Andalusia: an occupied space. 4. Final thoughts. 5. Bibliography.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Religious life is a phenomenon that forms an essential part of any cultural group. It is a phenomenon whose presence has been constant in all societies and cultures, as evidenced by studies in fields as varied as History, Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology or Anthropology. Religious activity, especially in relation to other cultural institutions, has peaked the interests of experts in a wide range of specialisms. Anthropology in particular has concerned itself with elaborating theories concerning religious diversity, understanding religion as learned human behaviour, something shared by all members of a determined group and, by extension, as part of the culture as a whole. Anthropologically, religion is thus understood as a “patron of beliefs, values and behaviour acquired by members of a particular society, be it as a result of conscious learning or by imitation” (Canton Delgado, 2001:17).

Anthropological interest in religion has sprung from many sources. Primarily, anthropological studies have concerned themselves with the origins of religion all the way up to its possible disappearance. Different schools of thought have provided for different interpretations: the functionalist school of British social anthropology, for instance, focused on the social function of religion. Regardless of theoretical perspective, however, and key to the anthropological study of religion is the fact that such investigation has no religious or doctrinal basis. Instead, anthropology attempts to investigate religious life as something social: describing and understanding it on the basis of empirical data. The study of religion is empirical in the sense that it is based on fieldwork and undertaken from an outside, or *etic*, perspective as well as an internal, or *emic*, perspective. The latter is noted by the fact that ethnographies study the very members that constitute a religious system as well as what significance pertaining to that religious system holds for such members. In this way, Anthropology, as a mode of investigation with its own field, focus and important theoretical contributions, can better our understanding of the phenomenon of religion in order to understand it as a specifically *human* phenomenon.

To date, Anthropology, as well as other branches of the social sciences, has had a largely androcentric vision of the world. This has prevented it from accessing the lives of women in many different cultures, in terms of the roles they play, their activities or how they organise themselves (Cruz, 2002:147). Although it is true that women have been present within classic anthropological literature, this presence has been associated with themes of anthropological interest such as marriage or the family. Moreover, though investigations have been carried out that have attempted to study the way in which different cultures understand the differences between men and women, the stress has been on sexual roles, supposedly due to an originating division of work based on biological and not cultural difference (Cruz 2002:148). With this state of play, anthropologists' have begun to consciously address such androcentric views, investigating and describing instead what it is women really do, in the face of what they are said to do. In this way, Anthropology aims to introduce new concepts within the study of women, thereby differentiating between sex and gender.

Sex is considered as “a biological category that makes reference to elements organic to and present within all animal species and according to which they can thus be categorised as male or female. Their differences are anatomically visible” (Cruz, 2002:151). Taking off from but separate to this biologically characterised difference is gender: a culturally constructed category that defines the totality of features or characteristics considered to be masculine or feminine. Gender is a system that includes the roles, attitudes, behaviour, values, and, above all -what can be expected of a person who is socialised according to a given sexual description.

The sex/gender system represents “the collective norms that every society uses in order to transform biological sexuality into cultural product. Every culture has its own system through which it normalizes gender” (Cruz, 2002:153) and defines sexual differences as well as what is considered to be sexually correct or incorrect. The assignation of gender comes into play at a very early age and this assignation carries with it a series of roles to carry out, ordered by the culture in which we have been born into. Likewise, it also marks our behaviour and our attitudes, that is: what we may become in accordance with our given masculinity or femininity. This collection of roles, attitudes and assigned behaviours constitutes gender identity. From that moment onwards, one knows how to behave oneself. Gender comes to be one of the principle filters for experiences and ways of seeing and relating to the world. (Cruz, 2002: 155).

In the last few decades, Gender Studies have developed as a field in Anthropology, with findings being used as a means of diagnosing social reality. In this way, the anthropological study of religious phenomena has addressed the transformation created within the social sciences as a whole through “situating the discussion of any phenomena in light of the assumption that all human beings are inserted in a structure marked by sexual difference that operates in speech,

social practices and cultural representations” (Tarducci, 1999:159). Indeed, in no society is the religious experience of men and women identical.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, this difference is seldom balanced because it is largely applied within societies where male-over-female hierarchical dominance exists. Perhaps because of this, and although the term ‘gender’ includes the cultural construction of masculinity, a great part of those works are about women (Tarducci, 1999:161).

This work reflects on the contemporary and historic situation, participation and aspirations of Andalusian woman in (the Catholic) religion on the basis of anthropological studies carried out in recent years in the provinces of Huelva and Sevilla. In so doing, it aims to demonstrate how activities (cleaning, decorating, tidying the house) carried out in the private or domestic sphere -a space always reserved for women- come into a religious realm (cleaning, decorating, tidying religious images). Female activity in the religious arena is, in the majority of cases, thus shown to be an extension of domestic activity and, as such, less visible and sometimes less valued. Male activity, by contrast, is more visible - being produced or performed in public, a space which is itself decidedly male. On the other hand, rituals where the presence / participation of women is more relevant will also be considered in order to reveal how the presence and participation of women in popular religiosity is at odds with those who hold dominant or protagonist roles. Such rituals include processions, religious pilgrimages to hermitages or sanctuaries known as “romerías”, visits to shrines and the pledging of “promises” or religious favours. The same can be said to occur with regards to belonging to religious associations, a theme of great importance in Andalusia. Whilst religious domesticity in this region has been shown to be traditionally feminine, men have typically assumed the role of protagonist in the most important voluntary associations in Andalusia - the brotherhoods - used as a means of establishing social relations within a community.

## 2. CHRISTIANITY AND GENDER RELATIONS

Nowadays the position of women in the world has changed considerably. In recent times, women have begun to gradually gain ground with regards to accessing the types of opportunities previously reserved only for men. It is now easier, for instance, for women to gain access to fields of employment and managerial positions that were previously denied to them. During the last few decades the impulse towards

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1 Caroline Walker Bynum (1982) tells us that “the religious experience is the experience of men and women and in no society is that experience the same” (quoted by Tarducci, 1999:159). “This difference is not neutral, but something that operates inside societies and cultures that establishes hierarchical relations of men over women.” It is because of this that although “gender includes the cultural construction of masculinity, the majority of studies about religion and gender research the female universe. It is about an intent to balance the androcentric trajectory of the discipline” (Tarducci, 1999:160).

women's rights has achieved many advances in a variety of areas. However, many of these are side-lined from seats of governance or real power. Also, although it is true that women are now prominent in the spheres of education, work and health, there remains particular inequality (with regards to what remains permissible) in the religious sphere.

We should begin by discussing the role that women have played over the course of Christianity's history. That is, the course of the feminine in the Christian tradition, and how feminine identity has been constructed on the basis of this role. We have already said that no society considers sexual differentiation as a simple fact. This means that boys and girls are led to acquire types of behaviour, which, according to their society, are part of their biological sex. They should also satisfy a series of rituals that have a symbolic rather than simply pragmatic efficacy: rites that come to reproduce symbolically the differentiation of the sexes. In this sense, the social construction of difference begins at birth. In the Christian world, the first ritual is baptism, a ritual which integrates the new-born into the religious community and, as such, into society. Baptism also presumes the imposition of personal and sexual identity with the act of receiving a name. In the majority of cultures, such names differ in terms of gender. From the period of the seventeenth century onwards, another ritual that has played an important role in the process of identity construction and, above all, of feminine identity, is the first Communion.

Communion is the Christian ritual that immediately follows Baptism. According to Delumeau, until the sixteenth century no ceremony marked this event. It was instead a private act. Only from the seventeenth century did the first Communion become a public ritual; a solemn ceremony that all of the members of a certain age group had to fulfil. However, this ritual would not reach its apogee until the nineteenth century, where it began to place more attention on children from all social levels, generated by the rise in living conditions. It also promoted the importance of the liturgy to such an extent that its influence reached beyond the sphere of the church or temple, becoming a great familial event and social rite of passage. After the First Holy Communion, boys wore long trousers and young girls could put up their hair in buns and start to prepare their trousseau, which in and of itself was the equivalent of defining oneself as a single girl (Delumeau, 1973). The rite of first communion thus has a social significance in marking the passage of childhood into youth and making sacred the entry out of infancy. Communion, however, has not had the same value for boys as it has done for girls. Boys dress in dark colours and their first suit as a symbol of maturity; girls dress in white as a sign of purity. Although, in the case of girls, it is not so much the dress in and of itself but the destiny it represents that is important. The dress presents the aim of marriage and also presents part of the future marital trousseau that girls, particularly in rural areas, still begin to prepare from a young age. It comes to be considered as part of a girl's dowry. This renewed stress on purity is also intimately related to the rise of the cult of the Immaculate Conception after the counterreformation. The cult takes as its image that

of the perpetual virgin, whose dogma was proclaimed in 1854 by Pope Pious IX. The Virgin Mary would also be the only woman exempt from original sin, becoming the first absolutely pure woman. Even the paintings of the Spanish golden age depict her as a young girl, dressed in white. If young girls are therefore dressed in white, it is without a doubt intended to convey and, to some extent, convert them into living images of the Virgin, as being like the Virgin is, for the church, being akin to the ideal of the Christian woman. In such a way, from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, the white wedding became the norm and the bride's dress destined to be carefully conserved after the wedding or given as an offering to the Virgin.

We have carried out a very general study of those rites that within the Christian tradition, and more specifically within the Catholic tradition, mark the differences between the masculine and the feminine. Nowadays we tend to think that, in terms of education, boys and girls are educated in the same manner. However, there are many cases where women are noted as being more pious than men and this makes us think that the acculturation of boys and girls is not as egalitarian as it seems. Studies in both the realms of Sociology and Anthropology have demonstrated differences in the modes of male and female religiosity (Argyle, 1966). The traditional Catholic religion could indeed be understood as presenting a series of elements which, in a certain sense, are more attractive for women than for men: the often feminine figure of the sacred heart of Christ has been shown as particularly popular amongst female worshippers and the act of praying the rosary and the worship of particular saints is principally a female activity. Furthermore, at many times the church has been the only place that was in some way "legitimate" for the expansion, the meeting or the exhibition of the Spanish woman outside the home (Gonzalez Blasco, 1992). Perhaps this accounts for the fact that practices such as prayer, signing up for membership in a church and attendance at liturgical events have long been activities marked by a strong female presence.

A 1990 study about European values (*The Survey of European Values* was first carried out in 1981) shows a notable difference between the grade of religiosity (understood here as undertaking the responsibility of an interaction with the divine) between men and women. These differences are attributed to the different modes of socialization, that is, the narrow relation that unites maternal grandmothers with their female grandchildren, this being the route of religious transmission. A significant correlation is also established between the importance of religious femininity and the value of interiority with respect to leisure: girls practice internal leisure to a much greater degree (sewing, embroidery, writing and reading), whilst boys practice activities outside of the home to a greater extent. This leads one to think that the orientation towards a culture of interiority would favour the increase of religiosity and that these differences would lessen as some of those factors that traditionally have explained the difference in the religiosity of men and woman lose force. Moreover, as equality is gradually reached in the status of both sexes, these differences could disappear. However, we cannot forget that in many cases justification for excluding women from determined spaces reserved for men is sought in tradition.



### 3. WOMEN AND RELIGION IN ANDALUSIA: AN OCCUPIED SPACE

When I started to become interested in the subject of religion in Andalusia I began with the preliminary observation that the participation of women in typical acts of popular religiosity was and is very extensive. We cannot forget the extremely important role played, throughout Andalusia, by the Virgen as mother and specifically her role as a protectoral figure - a much more prominent image than the male figure of God. I thus set out to describe the activities of those women and their own experience of the religious in the context in which these take place, differentiated from the domestic or ordinary, everyday sphere and the public and extraordinary. For this I chose to concentrate in some research extracted from fieldwork carried out in the provinces of Huelva and Sevilla.

Men and women occupy distinct spaces within the context of popular Andalusian religiosity. Within the domestic sphere it is women who are in charge of asking for divine help in protecting the home and its inhabitants. In order to do so, it is very common to appeal to prayer and the distribution of religious images around the home, especially in strategic places such as corridors or doors and in rooms such as bedrooms or the dining room. Women are also in charge of protecting members of their families, giving them tokens or small religious pictures during difficult moments such as in the case of illness or travel. Likewise, a greatly important aspect and something to keep in mind is the social role that women play as transmitters of devotion and religious practice in the heart of the family. It is women who pass down common prayers (Our Father, Hail Mary) from generation to generation as well as various protective formulas (Four Corners or With The Lord I Sleep). This is a process of learning that is normally conducted at bedtime (Castilla-Vazquez, 2009).

“When I was small, my mother always taught me, how does that song go...? Little Jesus of my life you are a child like I, for that I love you so and I give you my heart, yours is not mine” (Woman, aged 60).

“In my house, when we were small, my mother would sing to my sisters and me this song, when we were going to bed: With God I go to sleep, with God I rise, the Virgen Mary and the Holy Spirit. Or this one: Four little corners has my bed, four little angels which guard me, two at my feet, two at my head and the Virgen Mart in front who says to me: ‘Girl, sleep and rest and fear nothing’” (Woman, aged 65).

“I never pray, that is, say prayers- the type which your mother taught you when young and that you say by heart. What I do is talk with the Virgin -above all the day of a religious festivity” (Man, aged 58).

In terms of an extraordinary/ sacred environment, it is the woman who takes the organisation of family celebrations upon herself as well as the devotions that

partner it such as baptism or Holy Communion. We cannot understand the sacred sphere unless we observe those activities where female participation is more evident. This is shown through visits to sanctuaries, attendance at the religious pilgrimages known as “romerías” and participation in religious processions. The sanctuary visit, representing a sacred place where people meet with the divine, can be made either individually or collectively. An individual visit is typically one where the person attends in order to give thanks for a received favour (having previously promised to attend should that favour be granted them). It has to do with a voluntary practice whose fulfilment means that the response to such petition has been positive. This is a form of relating to the divine that is very much extended in Andalusia, also highlighting the fact that the person who makes such a promise is not always the person who needs the divine favour. Instead, promises tend to be a formula largely employed by women in critical moments. They are the ones that make them as well as those who, once they have been solicited, carry out whatever has been promised in exchange. In such a way, a compromise is established between the person that makes the promise and the divinity. If the result of the petition is satisfactory the person must thank the divine for whatever has been delivered through the medium of offerings, devotions or votive offering (Castilla-Vazquez, 1994).

“If someone has fallen ill or is about to go on a trip people tend to ask the Virgen for help -but that’s a woman’s thing. Men don’t tend to go to the sanctuary because normally Church matters are taken care of by women” (Man, 45 years old).

“When my husband was ill, I went to the sanctuary to ask the Holy Virgen to cure him. My husband got better and I fulfilled my promise the day of the procession by walking a long way barefoot behind the Virgen” (Woman, 50 years old).

In terms of collective visits, we can also include the “romerías” as a type of collective pilgrimage that consists in visiting a sanctuary or sacred place found at a certain distance from a town or city. The role of women is also distinct in the romerías in comparison to men. Women, for instance, are the ones responsible in preparing the food for family and friends during the celebrations that accompany such a religious pilgrimage. They are also the ones who decorate the streets where the religious image will pass through and tidy the sanctuary (cleaning and decorating it with flowers) thereby preparing it for worship.

“Decorating the streets and all those other details tend to be done by us women... The done thing in a romería is that the men occupy themselves in preparing the drink (drink is a man’s thing) and the women take care of the food” (Woman, 50 years old).

Likewise, as the majority of these types of religious celebrations in Andalusia are dedicated to the Virgen, women are in charge of dressing up and doing the hair and even make-up of the Virgen.

This is a space reserved for women where a man cannot intervene. In the majority of cases this role attributed to women is collected in the very statutes of the Brotherhoods where the work of “serving women” are mentioned. These are the women in charge of dressing the Virgen as well as washing and preparing clothes for her for the *romería* religious pilgrimage and the procession. Women are also in charge of making offerings of flowers and the ones who normally present young children to the Virgen, praying over them with a sacred blanket for protection.

“I have spent many years as a serving woman to the Virgen and that makes me feel proud, I do it as if it were the greatest thing in the world. I also am in charge of looking after the jewels that many devotees give to the Virgen as presents. This has always been done by women: I doubt there are many men who have seen the Virgen without clothes on” (Woman, 57 years old).

Having mentioned a series of activities that fall within the realm of popular religiosity, we cannot forget that the organisation of these acts are themselves based on associations whose function is precisely to prepare such rituals. These are the most common associations in Andalusia: the Brotherhoods. These are understood as secular public associations that nevertheless come together with a religious end. Legally these are included within canonical law and among their aims is that of fostering the religious formation of its members or brothers although the principal objective is to worship and pay homage to a determined devotion or saint. The Brotherhoods can be either of glory or of penitence. A Brotherhood of Glory is so named if its aim is that of worshipping a patron saint or the Virgen, concentrating on the day of the saint’s religious festivity. The processions or *romerías* can be celebrated at any time throughout the year, although normally they tend to happen during Spring. In turn, a Brotherhood of Penitence is defined as one in which the members worship images of the deceased Christ or the Virgen in pain and their principal activities take place during Holy Week. Women play different types of roles in both forms of Brotherhood. Despite the fact that the Church considered the liturgical rights of both equal in the laity in the 1983 new edition of the Code of Canonical Law<sup>2</sup>, in some Andalusian Brotherhoods women cannot choose or be chosen as members, with the added impossibility of their taking up directorial roles.

We have already stated that in recent times women have started to claim, in a gradual way, the same job postings previously obtained exclusively by men. But, in the case of the Brotherhoods, the acceptance of women as members in the most renowned type of association in Andalusia has been most remarkable in its absence. This is not only the case with regards to admission into to a Brotherhood, but participation in the processional march as Nazarenes is also often difficult.

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<sup>2</sup> This data made in reference to the city of Seville can be found in Rodríguez Mateos (1998:154 y ss).

On the other hand, occasional acceptance of women in processions does not mean that they enjoy the same rights as men in spite of what is declared in the Code of Canonical Law. In the city of Seville many of the Brotherhoods<sup>3</sup> do not even grant them eligibility which means that women taking on directorial posts is practically impossible, leaving them to be simple observers. In the majority of cases, Brotherhoods refuse to open up a space traditionally reserved for men. As such, whilst domestic religiosity has traditionally been a female matter, it is men who exclusively render the role of protagonist in the Brotherhoods. It must be said, however, that in some cases it is women who oppose the initiatives of other women, making the change of attitude even more difficult in this respect.

“If I say that I would like to process it is not because I want to go against what the other brothers say, but because I believe it is a right that women in the Brotherhoods have, as the sisters that we are” (Woman, 40 years old).

“A lot of times the hardest thing is not the comments of the brothers, but the comments of other women, who do not accept that we want to participate in the processions as Nazarenes. This lack of union makes things even more difficult” (Woman, 39 years old).

Those keen to oppose the integration of women into the Brotherhoods vary in their justifications. These range from claiming defence of tradition, the need to respect ancestral customs, of repeating the rituals with fidelity, even appealing to aesthetic tastes or the widespread growth of the Brotherhoods that the general acceptance of women as Nazarenes would suppose. This is despite the fact that children are accepted without discussion in the processions with age boundaries becoming increasingly lower (Rodríguez Mateos, 1998:156).

“I don’t see so many problems with this change we want; I don’t see the difference between whether a man or woman is the one walking beneath a hood” (Woman, 45 years old).

As we have said previously, the role of women has always been hidden and has not been valued sufficiently in the public sphere, due to which the desire to now claim this space is understood as going against the masculine, traditionalist status quo, where the public and visible has been a thing of men and where the private and invisible is and continues to be a space reserved for women. The Brotherhoods use arguments to delegitimize and discredit the concept of a female Nazarene as a real Brotherhood member, all because this, in some sense, presumes a rupture with the traditional roles imposed on women in the Brotherhoods. The segregation of women in these associations comes imposed by the traditional sociocultural

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3 Only 17 of the 50 Brotherhoods that process in the city of Seville during Holy Week allow women to wear the Nazarene tunic, according to data compiled by Rodríguez Mateos (1998).

differences between the genders in traditional Andalusian society, although it is also true that there have been important changes detected in this respect.<sup>4</sup> The domestic and implicitly subordinated role of women has also been carried over to the performance of their traditional roles within the organisation of the Brotherhoods in their acting as “serving women” (dressers of the Virgin) or as seamstresses and those in charge of preparing the tunics for their husbands and sons. The problem that presents itself is not so much female participation in the heart of the Brotherhoods, but the possibility of becoming incorporated into the public ritual, the external part of such associations. We arrive at the classic dichotomy between the domestic and the public, a structure that has established itself as a universal model to explain the subordination of woman (Moore, 1991:36).

#### 4. FINAL THOUGHTS

The change undergone by western society with regards to how women are perceived has also been at play in the religious sphere. The transformations to the roles women carry out in society and in the professional sphere have been partnered in the desire of claiming participation in activities that have, until now, been reserved for men. At present, there still remains a difference in the equality of opportunity with regards to both genders. That said, this has been challenged by the increasing popularity of women in directorial positions within Brotherhoods, even occupying the post of Elder Sister, especially in some Brotherhoods of Glory in the province of Huelva or participating in rituals and religious pilgrimages. Thus, although -as Dolores Juliano (1997) has pointed out- religious festivity could be an occasion more geared towards consolidating control exercised by the dominant sectors, it could also therefore be converted into a space open to the claims of the sectors who normally are not the protagonists in a public space. It remains to be seen what will be the case with regards to the Andalusian example- whether the public sphere of the religious will be continue to be marked by the absence of women, as it has been traditionally and historically, or by their budding presence, setting a course already in motion within many other spheres of public life.

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4 However, in some towns in the province of Huelva I have found that the participation of women as Nazarenes in religious processions during Holy Week did not at all alter the ritual, nor aesthetic aspects nor the highly-valued “seriousness” in the carrying out of both.

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