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Unpacking the Sin of Gender

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Keywords

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Ideological Colonization, or A Sin Against God the Creator

In a meeting with Polish bishops preceding the World Youth Day in July 2016, Pope Francis deplored the prevalence of what he calls 'ideological colonization' in the contemporary world. Addressing a question by a Polish bishop about the situation of refugees, the Roman Pontiff declared:

In Europe, America, Latin America, Africa, and in some countries of Asia, there are genuine forms of ideological colonization taking place. And one of these – I will call it clearly by its name – is [the ideology of] gender'. Today children – children! – are taught in school that everyone can choose his or her sex. Why are they teaching this? Because the books are provided by the persons and institutions that give you money. These forms of ideological colonization are also supported by influential countries. And this [is] terrible!

In a conversation with Pope Benedict (...) he said to me: 'Holiness, this is the age of sin against God the Creator'. God created man and woman; God created the world in a certain way... and we are doing the exact opposite. God gave us things in a "raw" state, so that we could shape a culture; and then with this culture, we are shaping things that bring us back to the "raw" state! Pope Benedict's observation should make us think. "This is the age of sin against God the Creator". (Pope Francis 2016b)

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Questions of gender and sexuality have a long history of causing a good deal of anxiety and trouble, both within and outside religious traditions. In recent years we are witnessing the rise of a particular kind of trouble that rejects the notion of gender as an analytical concept. This outspoken resistance comes in the wake of the partial, incomplete, and often precarious ways in which gender as an analytic category has become part of current frameworks to account for social reality, in various realms such as academic scholarship, political organizing and mobilization, and national and international governance.

Within the realm of scholarship, many decades of critical elaboration on questions of sex and gender have led to gender as an analytical category, that is to say, as 'a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes and [...] a primary way of signifying relationships of power' (Scott 1986: 1067). The entrenchment of gender within the realm of politics, policy-making, and governance has led to the development of 'gender mainstreaming', both as an approach and a policy tool. Seeking to apply a gender lens to any area of public action, it expresses particular understandings of the machinations of gender and illustrates how specific actors hope to transform gender relations through voluntary political intervention. The reference to 'mainstreaming', moreover, draws attention to gender acquiring a more widespread usage, which in turn renders the pushback against gender more tangible.

The pushback against gender takes different forms and shapes – some of these are more subtle and insidious, and might rely on a continued usage of gender, while others reject the very notion of gender all together. The anti-gender visions and mobilizations that coalesce around the term 'gender ideology' are an expression of the latter.¹ 'Ideology' performs a particular rhetorical labor here, as it conjures a vision in which the spheres of beliefs and ideas are separated from the sphere of reality, and gender is allocated to the former, thereby undermining the knowledge production and truth claims of many decades of gender studies scholarship. As such, these oppositions to gender can be read as projects of alternative knowledge production. By invoking both common sense and 'hard' sciences such as biology or medicine, they aim to dismantle a wide array of research in social sciences and humanities, and notably, but not only, research inspired by a poststructuralist approach (Kuhar 2015).

The pushback against gender also relies on the political language of 'resistance against political correctness' and new forms of totalitarianism. Gender would be the coded language of a global conspiracy through which corrupt elites attempt to overthrow the world as it has always been and to seize power to impose their perverted and minority values. As the French priest and psychoanalyst Mgr Anatrella, who is one of the main 'gender ideology' critics, has put it, this 'ideology' is promoted by a wide network of international agencies and 'succeeds the Marxist ideology, while being more oppressive and more pernicious because it is presented under the cover of a subjective liberation from unfair constraints, of a recognition of personal freedom and the equality of all before the law' (2011: 3). Drawing upon the populist trope of 'us vs. them', gender critics argue that they voice the concerns of a silenced people, and they warn fellow citizens about threats they may have overlooked. In this frame,

¹ In some countries, gender critics rather use the expressions 'gender theory' or '(anti)genderism' (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). See also Garbagnoli in this volume.

gender operates as the 'symbolic glue' uniting actors with diverging objectives and strategies against a common enemy (Kováts and Põim 2015).

This discourse has fueled numerous mobilizations in Europe and elsewhere, particularly from 2010 onwards (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Paternotte 2015; Paternotte et al. 2015). In several countries, opposition took the form of spectacular demonstrations, such as the French *La Manif pour tous* since 2012, when hundreds of thousands of people took the streets in what were some of the largest demonstrations of the last decades in France (Béraud and Portier 2015; Paternotte 2017a; Perreau 2016; Robcis 2015). *La Manif pour tous* was organized in the wake of national debates about marriage equality; yet their frame of mobilization purposefully exceeded that of 'gay marriage'. The hallmark images of the demonstrations included the silhouettes of a nuclear family and of a little knight and princess, all painted in pink and blue colors, with slogans such as 'Don't lay a finger on our gender stereotypes' or 'We want sex, not gender' (see Fassin in this issue for further analysis of such images, as well as Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Tricou 2017). It is rather striking that an analytical category exercises the power to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people on the streets – this is far from 'academic business' as usual. The mobilizations do render, in an ironic manner we might add, the reality of gender as a concept more solid, as this opposition to gender does re-affirm its existence and relevance.

Yet this affirmation comes at a price: it hollows out gender's analytic power. Moreover, in the case of Catholicism, it tends to reproduce a particular idea of 'proper' or 'authentic' gender relations within the Catholic Church. Lest the recent debate on gender ideology makes us forget: Catholicism knows a long history of doing gender and sexuality in ways that, in rather anachronistic terms, could be seen as gender-bending or queer (see for example Castelli 1991; Janes 2015; Jordan 2002; Van Osselaer 2013). The Catholic Church, in other words, has a legacy of enabling various kinds of spaces for those whose lives are not easily molded into heteronormative marriage and has eagerly and lavishly entertained homosociability and also homoeroticism. It is, therefore, all but helpful to cast 'gender ideology' as a return to a traditional Catholic regime of sexual difference, yet that is often the claim that those who resist 'gender' seek to make.

In this special issue of *Religion and Gender*, we seek to further explore the current rise of 'gender ideology' and we consider in particular the Catholic Church and the role of the Vatican in the construction of this cultural and political movement. This means we stray from the journal's general commitment to address themes from a comparative religions perspective. There are a few reasons for doing so. Surely anti-gender visions and mobilizations can be found in different ideological corners of society, and cannot be confined to the religious field in general or to one religious tradition in particular (Hark and Villa 2015; Verloo 2017). Yet the movements that have gathered in the name of 'gender ideology' have been driven, to a large extent, by theological developments as well as mobilization efforts within the Roman Catholic Church (Carnac 2014; Case 2011; Fillod 2014; Garbagnoli 2014; Kuhar 2015; Paternotte 2015). This encompasses a theology of complementarity of the sexes, which, as Case substantiates in great detail in this volume, can be seen as a theological innovation within the Catholic Church that has been crucial in the articulation of 'gender ideology' (see also Fassin 2007). This project also intersects, in its philosophy and its modes of action, with other crucial endeavors of the Church, such as the

so-called New Evangelization (Paternotte 2017b; Tricou 2016). Empirical studies, moreover, have attested to the usage of available networks, channels, and resources within the Church to frame this discourse and build as well as sustain these mobilizations (Béraud and Portier 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017).

Lest our focus be misunderstood: the Catholic Church does not have a monopoly on the contemporary opposition to and rejection of gender. Various anti-gender positions have emerged within other religious traditions. It is well known by now that the opposition to gender as a concept, and more specifically its usage within 'gender mainstreaming' policies, became visible at the UN conferences in Cairo (1994) and in Beijing (1995) among a coalition of religious actors: the Vatican, the US Christian Right and a variable group of Christian and Muslim States (Bayes and Tohidi 2001; Buss 1998 and 2004; Buss and Herman 2003; Swiebel 2015).

Nor do religious actors have a monopoly on the opposition to gender (Verloo 2017). Gender as an analytical category has been resisted from theoretical and political standpoints that differ significantly, and may not have anything in common beyond a quarrel with the concept. These include neoliberal and positivist paradigms that share a weak record on sociological power analyses,² but also certain Marxist perspectives that remain ill-equipped to account for those machinations of power that cannot be reduced to one set of power relations, that is, those of socio-economic class. Moreover, a critique of gender as an analytical category is also *emic* to the field of feminist thought and women's movements.³ This internal and on-going debate within feminism, which speaks to issues of how to think embodiment, subjectivity, and sexual difference, renders, to say the least, the rise of anti-gender mobilizations – and possible 'unholy alliances' as Garbagnoli points to in her article in this volume – even more complex.

This complexity and the multi-layered character of the current pushback against gender as a concept is precisely what urges us to focus on one particular location, i.e. the Catholic Church, in which a particular form of resistance against gender, i.e. 'gender ideology', has developed. Anti-gender sentiments and resistance do not take a universal or global form and the specificity of the opposition to gender matters a great deal. In other words, the different streams that partake in a larger cultural and political critique to gender deserve their own situated analyses. Moreover, as we have already mentioned, the Catholic Church effectively plays a crucial role in the political mobilizations against gender, and more specifically in the invention of the concept of 'gender ideology' and its intellectual and theological moorings. In sum, while the resistance to gender in general and the development of 'gender ideology' in particular cannot be ascribed to the Catholic Church alone, the Church presents itself as a crucial protagonist. This special issue is therefore dedicated to the Catholic root of a larger campaign against gender.

² See e.g. Bracke's discussion of 'gender lite' (Bracke 2014) about more subtle forms of rejecting gender as an analytical category.

³ Feminist sexual difference theory is a significant part of Feminist Theory in general, and Feminist Philosophy in particular, with scholars such as Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Luisa Muraro. Feminist sexual difference thinking most often represents a critique of a humanist vision of subjectivity, often in relation to psychoanalytical theory and/or French post-structuralism. For a conceptual discussion on how (her own) feminist sexual difference theory relates to (Butler's) gender theory, see Braidotti (2002).

Habemus Gender: Catholic Visions of Gender

So how and why does 'gender ideology' matter to the Catholic Church? As the words of Pope Benedict amplified by Pope Francis in the opening quotation suggest, the Vatican considers the analytical notion of gender as a threat to Divine Creation. More specifically, gender is perceived as holding the power to destroy Divine Creation, which renders it diabolic. To grasp the depths of the threat of gender and the signification of 'gender ideology' in the eyes of the highest echelons of the Catholic hierarchy, it is worth turning to the following quote from a speech by Cardinal Robert Sarah, the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

A theological discernment enables us to see in our time two unexpected threats (almost like two "apocalyptic beasts") located on opposite poles: on the one hand, the idolatry of Western freedom; on the other, Islamic fundamentalism: atheistic secularism *versus* religious fanaticism. To use a slogan, we find ourselves between "*gender ideology and ISIS*". Islamic massacres and libertarian demands regularly contend for the front page of the newspapers. (Let us remember what happened last June 26!)⁴ From these two radicalizations arise the two major threats to the family: its subjectivist disintegration in the secularized West through quick and easy divorce, abortion, homosexual unions, euthanasia etc. (cf. *Gender theory, the 'Femen', the LGBT lobby, IPPF [International Planned Parenthood Federation], ...*). On the other hand, the pseudo-family of ideologized Islam which legitimizes polygamy, female subservience, sexual slavery, child marriage etc. (cf. *Al Qaeda, Isis, Boko Haram, ...*)

Several clues enable us to intuit the same demonic origin of these two movements. Unlike the Spirit of Truth that promotes communion in the distinction (*perichoresis*), these encourage confusion (*homo-gamy*) or subordination (*poly-gamy*). Furthermore, they demand a universal and totalitarian rule, are violently intolerant, destroyers of families, society and the Church, and are openly Christianophobic. (Sarah 2015b; emphasis in original)

These words are part of a speech Sarah delivered at the Ordinary Synod on the Family in October 2015. The Synod on the Family was yet another initiative by the Argentinean Pontiff soon after he took up office as the head of the Roman Catholic Church, and is expressive of how much he considers the family as an urgent matter of concern (Etudes 2015; Vanderpelen and Paternotte 2015). This consultation of the bishops, and by extension the Church, became an elaborate process, which included a large survey distributed to parishes and across diocesan offices in preparation of an Extraordinary Synod that took place in October 2014 and whose preliminary conclusions served as a working document for the Ordinary Synod in 2015. In between the two synods, the World Meeting of Families took place in Philadelphia. This elaborate process, in tandem with the compassionate style of Francis' papacy, had led some to suggest that the Synod might lead to doctrinal change, and notably with respect to the Church discipline that bars divorced-and-remarried Catholics from receiving the Eucharist but also with respect to homosexuality. Yet the final documents ended up reaffirming existing doctrine and engaging merely

⁴ The reference to June 26, 2015, points to the day that has been called the Ramadan terrorist attacks in France, Kuwait, Somalia, and Tunisia, as well as the day the Supreme Court in the U.S. decided in favor of marriage equality.

on the level of pastoral care. Until now, the Pope's emphasis on compassion and mercy has indeed not led to any major doctrinal change in bioethics.⁵

The voice of Cardinal Sarah, an inspiration for conservative Catholics and an outspoken critic of Francis' papacy, was an important one during the entire process (for more on Sarah's theological vision, see Sarah 2015). The speech cited above was delivered at the very end of the synodal process and certainly echoes the concerns of many synodal fathers. The speech is striking in a number of ways. It is a concise expression of how 'gender ideology' operates as a frame that encapsulates a wide spectrum of issues and actors whose connection cannot be taken for granted. The usefulness of 'gender' in 'gender ideology' is precisely that it brings together a number of concerns high on the agenda for conservative Catholic activists: rejection of a wide range of reproductive rights for women (notably abortion), rejection of same-sex marriage and homosexual parenting, attachment to particular roles for men and women and rejection of the transgression of these roles, sex education, and the endorsement of particular – heteronormative – norms about sexuality. Gender as an analytical concept provides the analytical and political connections between these different topics: it renders different 'issues' into a coherent vision. It also amalgamates potentially dissenting actors (feminists, LGBTQ activists, and gender studies scholars) under a single figure of 'the enemy' to be combated by the Church.

More specifically, 'gender ideology' provides coherence between two questions that the Church has a long history of struggling with: the women's question on the one hand, and the question of sexual orientation on the other. The concept of gender effectively enables the Church to think these questions together. This implies that 'gender ideology', in all its opposition to gender as a concept, nevertheless firmly relies on and reproduces the analytical work that gender as a category does, as it connects the dots between, among other things, sex, sexuality, reproduction, and family-formation. Precisely through accepting and making the link between these issues, the concept of gender is re-affirmed, even if its reproduction ostentatiously serves to reject the concept all together. 'Gender ideology', in other words, is caught in an inescapable bind: its rejection of gender remains premised upon, and ironically reaffirms, the conceptual linkages that gender as a category has established.

Sarah's words also reveal, once more in a concise way, how the Vatican positions itself in relation to this frame of 'gender ideology'. Gender ideology, Sarah suggests, is situated on the side of the apocalypse, of the demonic. It does not stand alone on those diabolical grounds, he points out, but finds itself in the company of Islamic fundamentalism and ISIS, another recent propagator of what Pope John Paul II has called the 'culture of death'. By associating 'gender ideology' with ISIS, Sarah conjures one of the most powerful signifiers of terror and terrorism currently available, in case his audience would fail to fully grasp the destructive power of 'gender', that is to say, its potential to destroy society, civilization, and humanity itself.

⁵ There has been considerable speculation whether such conclusions express the difficulty of change within the Church, including an inevitable pushback against the Pope's desire to move on some of these issues, or whether the entire process intentionally served to channel existing desires for more substantive change among some parts of the Catholic Church, including some bishops such as Antwerp Bishop Johan Bonny (Bonny 2014; Bonny et al. 2016), back into the doctrine. For further reflections, see Charamsa in this volume.

While Sarah's words, especially from a scholarly point of view that engages critically with questions of gender and sexuality, might seem hyperbolic, his framing deserves careful attention. Associating 'gender ideology' with ISIS evidently serves to further dismiss the former, but it also sheds light on how to understand the demonic. The demonic in its contemporary guise, Sarah suggests, has a dual character. It presents itself a diptych, with the face of 'gender ideology' and the face of ISIS hinged upon each other. Opposites on first sight – and here Sarah can rely on hegemonic understandings about gender and violent Islamist movements, including references to female sex slaves as well as the killing of gays – they should, Sarah argues, be more adequately understood as sharing *the same origin*: a confusion and subordination so profound that its origins must be demonic. Sarah's juxtaposition of homo-gamy and poly-gamy invokes the forked tongue of the diabolic serpent. The demonic 'other' and its dual character both serve a clear role: they allow the Church to position itself as Divine and simultaneously in line with reason and 'natural law' in the face of two diabolic extremes. Between homo-gamy and poly-gamy lays the path of (hetero) monogamy, bestowed with reason and natural law.

The association of gender ideology with ISIS, moreover, also hints at debates on religious freedom, another rising topic amongst conservative Catholics. While most Christian leaders have denounced ISIS' attacks on Christians and the threats faced by fellow believers in the Middle East, conservative Catholics are now claiming that their religious freedom is similarly endangered by 'gender ideology' in the West. Religious freedom has indeed become the main language spoken by US bishops, who, in the wake of the Supreme Court's *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, have repeatedly vilified what they consider to be attacks by the Obama administration. Similarly, what triggered mass demonstrations in Italy was the Scalfarotto Bill, which is an attempt to combat homophobia. In both cases, equality policies and antidiscrimination laws are accused of curtailing the freedom of Catholics to practice and express their faith, especially when such laws do not recognize conscientious objection (Anderson 2015; Eberstadt 2016). In brief, both gender and ISIS are taken to be threats to the right of Catholics to openly express their faith, allowing Sarah to denounce them as 'openly Christianophobic'.

Last but not least, both Sarah's and Francis' words bring us to the post-colonial dimension that runs through many discussions of 'gender ideology' within the Church. The expression 'ideological colonization', as it figures prominently in our opening quotation, has a longer genealogy within the Church and indicates an epistemological struggle over the definition of social reality. It refers to the power-fraught ways in which social reality would be obscured by certain preconceptions or frames, and throughout its history the Church has mobilized various understandings of ideological colonization (for example Marxism as ideological colonization) to advocate for a 'retrieval' of the real world. Such an epistemological project relies on a concept of reality untainted by human ideas or frames, to which the Church has privileged access. The current rise of 'ideological colonization' in the Church is moored in this genealogy, while explicitly connecting it to the historical realities of colonization and imperialism by the West at large, and Europe in particular. Pope Francis, who has pretty much pushed the expression ideological colonization to the forefront of Vatican discourses, is the first pope from the Global South, and more specifically a geo-political location where theories and politics of decolonization have been flourishing. Cardinal Sarah's ecclesial career is equally noteworthy: he was the youngest bishop

to be ordained to cardinal in the Church, and he is the second African to hold a senior position at the Vatican. He is, moreover, often seen as a representative of Catholic Africa in the highest corners of the Vatican, and this is relevant for various reasons: not only is Africa the only continent where Catholicism is currently growing, but it also represents a context in which the Catholic Church feels the rise of Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches in particularly intense ways. This competitive religious market is characterized by an increased pressure on the African Catholic Church to position itself uncompromisingly when it comes to homosexuality, in response to Pentecostal and Charismatic denunciations of the Catholic Church as partaking in a global conspiracy promoting gay rights.

Both Sarah and Pope Francis, in other words, represent the rise of a postcolonial Church, which provides the context for the current framing of questions of gender and sexuality in terms of ideological colonization. More specifically, ideological colonization here refers to how the West, which from the highest echelons of the Church is often perceived as in a state of spiritual decay, continues to engage in oppressive colonization through financial and political pressure on countries in the Global South to comply with Western liberal positions on abortion, contraception, sterilization, homosexuality, and marriage equality. Francis has emphasized (notably in *Amoris Laetitia*) that the spread of gender as a concept is the work of rich countries, and that it is unacceptable 'that local Churches should be subjected to pressure in this matter and that international bodies should make financial aid to poor countries dependent on the introduction of laws to establish "marriage" between persons of the same sex' (Pope Francis 2016a: 251). Sarah on his side has argued that the 'subjectivist disintegration' of the family, which in the Vatican's vision is connected to a wider acceptance of homosexuality, comes from the West, while the salvation of the family, and therefore the salvation of the Church, will come from Africa (Sarah 2015a).

This postcolonial discourse positions the Global South in general, and Africa in particular, as a location where family relations are both more 'authentic' and more in line with Catholic doctrine – in opposition to a 'decadent', 'denigrate', and unchristian state of affairs in the West. This line of reasoning is, moreover, easily naturalized, in the way in which for instance homophobia is understood to be a more 'natural' or 'authentic' state of being, and gay identity and visibility are associated with the downfall of civilization. This global division of labor between the West and the Global South when it comes to sexuality, reproduction, and family-formation is not the prerogative of the Catholic Church, and has been popular notably within Evangelic Churches but also Islamic movements in the last decades. This framing indeed invokes the post-colonial in powerful ways, and notably the idea of national self-determination. It is also intricately connected to the ways in which gender relations and sexuality have figured, and continue to figure, in colonial and imperial discourses and practices. This was notably the case in the *missions civilisatrices*, with their 'white men saving brown women from brown men' impetus, as Spivak (1988) put it in her seminal essay, that drove and indeed continues to drive colonizing and imperial projects (see also Abu Lughod 2015; Bakshi et al. 2016; Bracke 2012; Puar 2007). The Vatican's current insistence on 'ideological colonization' mobilizes a powerful critique of global practices of development aid as well as postcolonial sentiments and identities at large. It aligns with the (ambiguous) rapprochement to liberation theology that Francis brought to the Roman Curia (for more on this ambiguity when it comes to liberation theology, see Pecheny et al. in this volume). It also

reflects the enduring intricacy between gender, sexuality, and global divisions of labor and power. Yet framing gender and sexuality ‘trouble’ within the Catholic Church in terms of ideological colonization in turn obscures and perpetuates deep-rooted colonial legacies of gender and sexuality. Like casting the monogamous nuclear family as ‘authentic’ in a way that ignores the modern Western genealogy of that particular family formation that led to its enshrinement in colonial law. Sarah’s presentation of Africa as an antidote to the Catholic Church’s gender trouble, and therefore as the future and salvation of the Church, effectively relies on a set of power-fraught silences and assumptions about gender and sexuality (including an assumption of homophobia as a ‘natural’ state of affairs) that serve the contemporary political agenda of the Roman Curia and notably its conservative stances on gender and sexuality. This agenda has already set the parameters of ‘good’ gender (i.e. sex) and sexuality, and stands far from the actual labor of decolonizing gender and sexualities – a labor that consists of unpacking an entire array of norms and conceptions pertaining to gender and sexuality that have been shaped by processes of modernity and colonization. The Vatican’s emphasis on ideological colonization, in sum, is grounded in very partial perspective on colonization at best, while reproducing profoundly colonial conceptions of gender relations, sexuality, and family formation.

This Special Issue

Many of these different aspects of ‘gender ideology’ are further discussed in the four articles gathered in this special issue. Most come from the *Habemus Gender!* conference, organized at the Université libre de Bruxelles in May 2014.⁶ Mary Anne Case and Eric Fassin delivered keynote speeches at this event, and Sara Garbagnoli presented in one of the panels.⁷ The fourth article, by Mario Pecheny, Daniel Jones, and Lucía Ariza, was solicited for this volume, in order to include an analysis from the national and political context that has shaped the first Pope from the Global South.

The first article, by Mary Anne Case, offers a genealogy of the theological origins of ‘gender ideology’, starting with Pius XII. It looks at the intellectual history of the Vatican’s theological anthropology of complementarity, as articulated by the five latest popes. Case argues that the doctrine of the complementarity of the sexes, which underpins the discourse on ‘gender ideology’, is an invention of the twentieth century, in response to feminist claims and politics. The second article, by Eric Fassin, offers a reading of recent gender debates in France in the light of the controversy between ‘essentialists’ and ‘constructionists’ in gay and lesbian studies, which itself relies on an older controversy between realists and nominalists. Drawing attention to the plurality of gender theories, Fassin

⁶ The conference received financial support from the Université libre de Bruxelles, the Fonds national de la recherche scientifique, the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Wallonia, the Commission communautaire française, the City of Brussels, the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men, the Centre d’action laïque, and the Association belge de science politique.

⁷ Other contributions to the conference have been published elsewhere (Paternotte et al. 2015; Robcis 2015).

situates gender ideology (or what he refers to as ‘theory-of-gender’) as a theory that reduces gender to sex, or at least a representation of biology, which often owes more to conservative common sense than to scientific discipline. Yet the distinction between nature and culture, he argues, is misguided, not in the least as it leads, on the theological side, to conflate natural law with the laws of nature. On the side of gender studies, moreover, it consolidates the distinction between sex and gender, which no longer captures a great deal of what gender studies is about. In her contribution, Sara Garbagnoli compares the French and Italian debates on ‘gender ideology’. She unravels how ‘gender ideology’ is a new rhetorical device produced by the Vatican, and she examines the ways in which these struggles play out in both countries, maintaining that ‘gender ideology’ should be understood as a political reaction to the political and epistemological revolution induced by gender and sexual minorities. Finally, Mario Pecheny, Daniel Jones, and Lucía Ariza discuss how religion and sexual politics intersect in the Argentinian political landscape. Their article traces how progressive legislation was passed, including sex same marriage, despite the opposition of the ecclesial authorities, and sometimes with support of some constituencies with the Church. They highlight Mgr Bergoglio’s actions and legacy within this landscape, and draw attention to the discrepancy between the passing of progressive legislation when it comes to sexual politics and the continued criminalization of abortion.

These four articles are followed by an interview with Mgr Krzysztof Olaf Charamsa, a former member of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, who reflects on how questions of gender and sexuality are approached within the Vatican. Charamsa challenges the Church’s understanding of sin, and perhaps even more so its understanding of reality, when it comes to gender and sexuality. In his reclaiming of reality, and indeed of the Gospel, he insists on the sinfulness of turning away from the realities of women and LGBTQ people in the Church and the world – a sin he holds the ecclesial authorities accountable for.

Last but not least, we have asked a range of scholars within the fields of gender studies and religious studies, and their intersections, to write brief commentaries on the various insights into the rise of ‘gender ideology’ that emerge from this volume. While it is too early to announce the full list of scholars that will offer complementary and critical perspectives, we are pleased to say that in the months to come a response section will be added to this volume. These responses add more angles and dimensions to the inquiry that drives this volume, i.e. why ‘gender ideology’ has gained so much traction in the Catholic Church these past decades, which is only one line of inquiry into a much broader kaleidoscope of the pushback against gender. The necessity and commitment to account for this pushback will no doubt continue in the times to come, and it is our hope that this volume offers a modest contribution to such a larger effort.

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