

ZILKA SPAHIĆ- ŠILJAK

Woman Theologian

Enormous Heart and Iron Shoulders

We should talk about Providence, but with measure, without imposition, hypocrisy and diversion. We should not hide behind God and use him as the excuse for injustice, violence, intolerance and avoiding responsibility.

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Zilka Spahić Šiljak is professor of gender studies and female theologian, the Deputy Director of Center for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies, Sarajevo University and Coordinator of Masters Program in Religious Studies. She is the cooperator and researcher in the field of human rights and gender issues in TPO Foundation Sarajevo. She is also a member of the Directorate of International Multi-religious Intercultural Centre (IMIC Sarajevo). She published the book *Women, Religion and Politics*, with Rebeka Jadranka Anić, she co-authored the book *Women Believers and Citizens*, and with Dino Abazović she is also co-author of the book *Monotheistic Three-voice: Introduction in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. She translated two works from English language and published several texts in domestic and international books and journals. A wife and mother, believer and scientist – is all she became, because of freedom and conviction.

• How do you feel as a Muslim when giving interview to the Catholic newspapers?

It is a pleasure to have opportunity to talk for *Svjetlo Riječi (The Light of Word)*, Catholic newspaper that demonstrates enough sensibility for all themes, comprising those multi-religious, and furthermore for the topics that are in the domain of gender and feminism. This is a perfect way to deepen the communication and representation of the other religious traditions and viewpoints, because only by getting to know each other and through dialogue, it becomes possible to reduce and remove prejudice and ignorance that we possess for each other. This is not the first time that I cooperate with *Svjetlo riječi* and I hope that it will not be the last one. I assume that, when speaking in the context of civilization, we have made sufficient progress in order that such contacts and reunions are becoming integral part of our way of life and act as testimonials of veritable pluralism and respect for diversity.

• You have been cooperating with Franciscans, and especially with your friend and professional colleague Rebeka Anić. What comprises this mutual cooperation?

I see Rebeka Anić as my sister, not only as a sister Franciscan, but as my sister by faith, and as a friend and huge backing and support in the fields where I work. When I found out that there is one nun in Croatia who is involved in these topics, I was more than happy to hear that in the Balkans there are more women interested in issues of gender, religion and human rights. After the first meeting, I knew that we will have fine cooperation, because Rebeka is great for dialogue and with her I can share

opinions, dilemmas, criticism, and also I can get support and create common programs for actions. Within the last few years, we worked together on several projects that brought excellent results among youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I especially point out the project *Modification of cultural customs and practices in Bosnia and Herzegovina* that had the objective to promote international standards for human rights – CEDAW and UN Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. The outcome of this project was the book *Women Believers and Citizens*. I hope that we will continue to work together on many other projects and that this pioneer efforts within the theme of religion and gender will fortify other women and men who can join us in finding the suitable place and role of religion in present-day society and in finding out right measure for everything in what we believe and in all what we do. In my view, it is significant that the self-critical and self-questioning voices of women appear in our religious communities and churches, because only in this way, we can make the universal messages of our religious traditions efficient. Rebeka and me, we both try to give our contribution through constructive criticism that we use from time to time to 'let the wind through' heritage of our religious traditions by striving to keep them fresh and actual in the context of the time we live in.

• In your book *Women, Religion and Politics*, you have systematically portrayed the unenviable status of the women in society and family in Bosnia and Herzegovina, since the Second World War onwards. What are the main results that you have achieved and why there were no similar investigations earlier?

The book *Women, Religion and Politics* is the result of my research for doctorate, which I completed it in Bosnia and Herzegovina. My intention was to question the role of religion in the lives of BH male and female citizens and understand the extent to which interpretative religious heritage of Judaism, Christianity and Islam impacts the status of women in public life and politics. In the post-war period we talked about negative influence of diverse religion on female life, but there were no researches, or data about this, and this was an additional motif for me, to make decision to investigate this topic in comparative and interdisciplinary manner.

The most important conclusions of my work demonstrated that religious interpretative heritage of monotheistic traditions together with cultural tradition and customs determine to a great extent the role and status of women in our society. I found that BH male and female citizens, no matter what religious tradition they belong to, have very limited knowledge about their own religion, that they read very little and that most often, they keep to the inherited traditions and customs. This shows how, for us, religion remains at most, arid tradition and profound emotion, and it is, at least, the veritable reflection of faith in Supreme Being. Although religious identification rates very high – 90% of examinees declared themselves as believers, only a small proportion of them actually practice religion, around 20% and probably less, because religion in practice is differently conceived among the examinees who were questioned.

The problem is that this limited conception of religion is being used in order to support the gender dichotomy between private/female and public/male sphere of acting, and to keep women as far as possible from positions of decision-making and power.

• **What are the main demonstrators showing that women in B&H are peer-by-rights to men?**

My research showed that more than 60% of interviewed males and females consider that in B&H men and women are not equal, and that there are numerous reasons why this is so. Before everything, education in B&H is not gender sensitive and in textbooks and media, women are mainly portrayed in traditional roles and professions, and their contribution in historical perspective is not mentioned at all. Besides this, what is present is 'feminizing' of profession to a great scale, and also of poverty, because women mostly take less paid jobs, in order to be able to dedicate themselves to their families. In accordance, there is still strict division between male and female professions and occupations. What happened in the period of transition is the so-called 're-traditionlizing (return to tradition)' of gender roles and suppressing of women into the private sphere of life, and this was encouraged by ethno-religious ideological platforms promoted by national and religious leaders. Concretely, for women, this meant fighting anew for certain rights already acquired in the period of socialism. It was held that socialist system weakened the family and moral within the family that was mainly responsibility of the women, whereas during the war and even later, struggles were conducted over female body for territories, ethnicities and moral un/cleanliness of one nation. Having in mind all this, the role of women in the public life and politics was only declaratively backboneed, since in practice, only a small percentage of women were still involved in politics.

The examinees with the highest and lowest level of education who practice faith and those with mothers of lowest level of education are the least apt to support women in politics. The reason for this should be searched for in the messages that believers receive from religious authorities in churches and mosques, or in religious papers and literature.

• **What are the results of your investigations regarding religious authorities?**

The important part of the research was considered with analysis of religious process (*Preporod-Renewal, Katolički tjednik- Catholic Weekly and Pravoslavlje-Orthodoxy*), and interviews with religious dignitaries. The majority declaratively supported equality, but additionally also the view which proposes that women do not require the positions and occupations that belong to man (priesthood, positions of imam or rabbis). The representatives of religious traditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina are promoting complementary religious relations in which male and female roles are clearly defined, as well as their professions and missions.

Glorification of maternity and the role of woman within the family, on the one part adds respect for woman, but on the other part, limits her involvement in public life and politics. There is no tendency to redistribute obligations, but rather the pressure on woman to choose: either family or career. The majority of the interviewed for example spoke in favor of preserving traditional family as the guarantee of survival of healthy society and community. Meanwhile, non selective conservation of certain traditions means for a woman, that she is still choosing between family and career, notwithstanding, that she takes over new burdens on herself, and that she has no same possibility to exercise her rights as the man. What I would like to specially emphasize

is the conclusion that all three religious traditions are equally patriarchal and that these values function very well within each one separately.

All this is encouraged to a great extent by women themselves, because they support, transfer and keep patriarchal system and they themselves do not show enough interest to be engaged in topics of gender equality in their own churches and religious communities, and within society in general. They do not realize that every right has to be fought for and that they must engage for their rights` preserving and improvement.

• **What about the book *Women Believers and Citizens*?**

This book was written as the product of two-year work with my colleagues Rebeka Anić and Milica Bakić-Hayden with whom I prepared the material for educating women in non-governmental sector about the topic of women`s rights in religious perspective. It was important to show that in secular society, it is possible to be good believer and good citizen, and that one identity does not exclude the other one, or rather they mutually complement and search within one another. In the end, the well-being of humanity is extremely important within religious and secular discourse of human rights, in the same way as discrimination, oppression and exclusion are not acceptable. Bu this book we wish to offer the texts about human dignity, gender theories, relations in marriage and family, reproductive rights, and involvement of women in social-political life and constructing peace, written from catholic, orthodox and islamic tradition.

I think that one such comparative and interdisciplinary reading can be very useful for academic, and for the wider community public. On the one hand, it can be motivating for believers to approach and inform themselves about the modern concept of human rights and equality of sexes that our country has the obligation to implement in practice, and on the other hand, for those who are not believers, it can be a useful material to introduce them with more religious concepts of human rights and to eliminate, in this way the prejudice and fears concerning religion in public space. Having in mind that religion here has significant role in lives of majority of male and female citizens, I think it is important to talk about the way in which it can contribute to development and well being of community and society in which we live. The book *Women Believers and Citizens* is one among many attempts to talk about the topic of women`s human rights from religious perspective, and to approach the sole idea of universal human rights, to male and female believers, through concepts and notions that are familiar to them.

• **The syntagm saying `women are gentler sex`, is it true?**

It depends in which way we approach sexes. If we look by physical constitution, the majority of women represent weaker sex, but if we look according to what women can sustain, suffer and do, especially for family and community, then the majority of women are stronger sex. The ways in which women found their ways in war and after the war and the way they fought for a family and surpassed the most difficult crisis and trauma in order to keep their families, shows that they have iron shoulders and enormous heart and will to sustain the most difficult emotional and psychological but also physical efforts. In the end, I think that it is individual and that there are both men and women that can be stronger and weaker speaking in terms of gender.

- **In some European, democratic countries ardent discussions are being led for and against cover and *nikab* in public space. What is your attitude regarding this matter?**

The cover is the question of human rights and freedom of religion. I think that no one has right to impose or to ban wearing it. This is individual right of each person. The human should not be estimated by what he or she wears on the head, but by what he or she has in the head. Somehow I have the feeling that much more important questions are passing by us, while media and public in the whole world remains preoccupied with the questions whether somebody needs to wear scarf on their head. While the whole world is choking in recession, many countries become poorer, and while ecological catastrophe is hanging above our heads because of insatiable hegemonic, imperialistic appetites of great powers, the question of life importance being imposed on us is whether Muslim woman should wear a scarf or not. In principle I am not entering in discussions about that, because I think that people should recognize and value myself according to what I think, write or do, and not according to the piece of linen that I have on my head. It is my choice and I expect other people to respect it, as well as I have respect for other people's choices.

- **Where did you have the best experience of prayer?**

The best experience of prayer for me was not related with the specific place or space, but rather with condition of my heart and soul. As a Muslim woman I can pray everywhere, since Prophet Mohammad said: 'All the earth is the place where we can pray to God'. Though, the most beautiful experiences of prayer are the late evening and early morning prayers at home, when everything becomes more and more quiet, and a human being can easily reach his own heart and God himself, exactly in a way as described by one famous Sufi and philosopher: 'I have been looking for God, and I went to the temple, and I couldn't find him there, then I went to synagogue, and I couldn't find him there either, then I went to the church and but he wasn't there, in the end I went to mosque, and he wasn't there either, and then when I peeped into my heart, I finally discovered him.'

- **What does the faith mean to you and is it necessary and when to talk about God?**

The faith is very important component of my life and identity and my most significant backbone and inspiration. We should talk about Providence, but with measure, without imposition, hypocrisy and diversion. We should not hide behind God and use him as the excuse for injustice, violence, intolerance and avoiding responsibility. As a believer I consider that God created all beings with a good reason, and that our attitude towards people mirrors in the best way our attitude towards God. I think that we can testify God in the most supreme way by our deeds, and less with vain words and too much alleging for him.